

SHEVOET MUSARAJ

**BEFORE  
THE  
DAWN**

**a novel**



SHEVQET MUSARAJ

# BEFORE THE DAWN

II

(a novel)

THE "8 Nëntori" PUBLISHING HOUSE  
TIRANA 1982

# BEFORE THE DAWN

II

(a novel)

THE BENTON PUBLISHING HOUSE  
TORONTO 1982



## PART FOUR



## CHAPTER I

### 1

There was an unusual agitation in the early hours of the morning in the house of Hajdar Bey, whom they often called «Mr. Kasimati». By ten o'clock, two cars stopped in front of the cast iron gate overhung by a climbing ivy plant. Major Jahja, in civilian clothes, Eprem Banka arm-in-arm with his wife, Mr. Meçe, the lawyer with a gloomy look which contrasted with that of the others and a young fellow of about eighteen, somewhat confused among his seniors, came out from the cars, one by one.

They were met at the gate and shown in by Mr. Kasimati himself, who was wearing a heavy dressing gown and slippers, too big for his feet, which he dragged over the floor.

The two cars departed, and in the yard remained only the mayor's guard, a tall gendarme with very thin legs that made him look like a stork.

«Did the forces start their march?» asked Mr. Ka-

simati rubbing his hands as he stood waiting for his guests to take their seats. Only Mrs. Banka remained standing admiring a porcelain tea service behind the crystal glass of the sideboard.

«Yes, they are on their way now,» replied the major proudly.

«This tea service is a real beauty! Hajdar bey, where did you find it?» asked Mrs. Banka interrupting the major.

«Tefta, leave us alone now! Can't you see that we have serious business to talk?» her husband rebuked her.

«Is that so? Then I'd better leave you gentlemen.» She stamped her foot on the floor like a spoiled child and walked towards the open door from where came muffled sounds of women talking.

The men looked silently at one another while. Mr. Banka lowered his eyes in confusion.

«We have great hopes...» went on the major. «The Germans have called for fresh special reinforcements from Greece and Yugoslavia.»

Mr. Kasimati glanced with a satisfied look at Mr. Meçe the lawyer who was holding his chin on the palm of his hand, looking aside as if the major's conversation was of no interest to him.

In the next room as soon as they saw Tefta among them, the women raised their voices, first with polite questions asking after her husband's and her children's health then about the communists, the political situation, which could be heard quite clearly in the men's room.

The young fellow who stood like a stranger among the men, caught the phrase «Agllai's boy» pronounced by Mrs. Banka and knew that it was about him they were talking but he could not tell if they were speaking with sympathy or not, and it made him get lost in thoughts... It was the third day since Miti was set free from jail through Mr. Banka's intercession, but

had so persistently been harassed with questions by that man that he would have rather remained in prison. Besides, Mr. Banka never left him out of his sight, and Miti had no chance to see someone of his comrades and find out what was happening in town. Ever since the day he was released and brought home to his mother, Mr. Banka had kept him by his side. The first words he said in his mother's presence were: «Look here, my boy, I have accomplished my duty as your brother-in-law and as a friend of your family. Now it is your turn to do what you are supposed to do...» And he did not move staying with them for two hours, until Agllai, who could still not believe her eyes, said to her son: «Now my dear, be a good boy, and go with Eqrem,» who, as it seemed, was just expecting these words from Agllai, took Mity with him in his car. He took him first to his office, then to his home.

Everywhere he introduced him to his friends and whenever alone repeatedly asked him: «Eh, what do you say? Are you going to help me or not?». Miti, never answered and Mr. Eqrem never got tired waiting either.

«The German cause is lost, there can be no doubt about that,» went on Mr. Eqrem. «But there are the English. We must listen seriously to what they say, or else Albania is lost too. And the English tell us not to disturb the Germans. But the communists don't seem to care about anything. All they are looking for is trouble. So the Germans, naturally, quite in self protection, are bringing the divisions one after the other and it means it is not difficult for them to make a *tabula rasa*<sup>1)</sup> out of Albania... Only on this point we can't help disagreeing with the communists. If it were not for that, I would have been the first to join them».

Miti, of course, had not put a lock to his mouth and from time to time he said something, but Eqrem had a ready answer to whatever he said. «Listen here, you

---

1) *Tabula rasa* (lat.) — scorched earth.

have not a responsible position in the Party, so even if you agree with me on some points, it will be of no consequence. Could you introduce me to some comrade of a certain importance? We could sit down with him and talk. I could try to explain to him our points of view, and you may be sure that I will convince him... However," here Eqrem took an expression of serious concern, — "We must be very careful; nobody but you and I must know about it... Else the Germans may find out and send us all to the devil".

So that is how matters stood. For two days and nights Miti had been tormenting himself. At last he made up his mind to see one of his comrades, tell him everything and ask him what he ought to do. He told his brother-in-law about his decision, and Eqrem accepted it gladly, but asked Miti to be more concrete about it:

"You must tell me which comrade you want to see. I don't want it to be someone of no importance."

"Let me see first... Let me talk first with somebody I know..."

"With whom precisely? I know some of your comrades. That nice fellow, for example, who wears a velvet jacket and a cap... But I don't remember his name."

"Alert, you mean?" Miti could have bitten off his tongue.

"Yes, Alert, what a name, eh? Is he illegal?"

"No."

"Where does he work?"

Miti hesitated.

"You don't know... You surely don't know..." whispered Eqrem. "That only proves what I have always been telling you, that you are too ingenious, that you never know with whom you mix and for whom. You are risking your life, whereas some of those comrades of yours can very well be foreign agents."

"He works in a Ministry," said Miti at last as if

wanting to prove that his brother-in-law was wrong, and that the communists never kept him in the dark.

«Is that so? Then I withdraw what I said. I am not a man to insist against plain facts... And what about that thin fellow who seems rather important?»

«The thin fellow?»

«Yes, the one who used to come often to your house, together with Alert. I have his name on the tip of my tongue.»

«No. I know nothing about him,» said Miti resolutely.

Eqrem gave him a curious ironical look.

«You want to keep your secret. That's conspiracy. Very well. It is none of my business.»

«It is not a matter of conspiracy but simply I don't know him.

«Don't tell me stories. You cannot pull my leg. I am not completely ignorant about these matters. You'd better say you have been ordered to keep it secret since he is illegal and must be rather important... and that would be all right... After all, I have nothing against people who stick to their principles.»

With these words Mr. Banka seemed to have put an end to the subject. But two or three hours later, when they were chatting with Tefta, who had brought a bottle of old wine to celebrate her brother's release and the wine seemed to have gone to their heads, Eqrem returned to the question that interested him so much.

«You know, Miti, there is one thing that intrigues me about that thin fellow I mentioned earlier. Is he an Albanian or a foreigner?»

«Of course he is an Albanian, you can be sure about that,» said Miti who felt his head rather heavy from the wine and from the talk they had had earlier when he pretended that he did not know Zef.

«His name does not sound Albanian,» remarked Eqrem seriously.

«Why, does not Zef sound Albanian to you?»

Eqrem shrugged his shoulders.

«Zef... Joseph.... How can one tell? Even his surname sounds foreign.»

«No, 'Moisiu' is quite common in Albania.»

«Zef Moisiu.» Mister Banka pronounced the full name with unhidden satisfaction. «Very well, very well! But you ought to know that this is only the first step you have made towards helping our cause of Albanianism». Do you understand me? But you are expected to do much more, to go through to the end. Yes to the very end...»

Miti opened his eyes wide as he saw the self-satisfied look of his brother-in-law. He wanted to say something but he felt his tongue too thick. The only thing he could remember after that was that his sister took him by the arm and led him to bed.

Next morning he came to himself and could have preferred to stay in bed, because he was terribly tired but Eqrem gave him no time to recover or even to wash himself and dress properly, because the car was waiting outside to take them together with Tefta to an «interesting visit» to Hajdar Bey.

## 2

Now Miti realized what that «interesting visit» was. He was sitting opposite Major Jahja, the most hated man by the communists, listening to his bragging about the forces sent to the South and kept silent, shrunken in his chair. He had no doubt that Mr. Banka had drawn his conclusions from last night's conversation, but he had no idea what the man intended to do. The words «Agllai's boy» heard from



the women's room had strengthened his conviction that he himself was the main subject of that «interesting visit».

The major had not finished his sentence when Mr. Meçe, a discontented look on his face, turned to Hajdar Bey.

«I don't agree at all with all this. We should try to find a common language with the National-Liberation Front instead of adding oil to the fire.

«There you go again!» Hajdar Bey said scornfully.

The major was watching the lawyer with curiosity, surprised to hear him speak with so much courage.

«Yes, of course,» continued Meçe obstinately.

The meeting we had the other day I think ought to have made you reflect more seriously over these questions.»

«What exactly do you mean?» asked Hajdar Bey looking first at the lawyer, then at the major.

The major sat stroking his shortened moustache with the fingers of his right hand keeping his eyes fixed on an alabaster ash-tray which occupied the center of the table.

Eqrem, who seemed to be well informed, perhaps better than the major himself, on everything that had taken place at that meeting, thought that this was the right moment to put in a word:

«In my opinion, we ought to fight on two fronts ...the operation that has just been launched may prove decisive, but we must not neglect the line of action indicated by Mr. Meçe. I think I have a new proposal to make...»

The word «proposal» impressed the others. They all turned their eyes towards Mr. Banka to hear what he had to say. But it was Miti who was most anxious to hear him, although he kept his eyes away from his brother-in-law.

«Primo, we should insist in our attempts to negotiate with the communists. I don't mean of course to

negotiate 'officially'. I am in favour of private meetings, individual talks which could help us bring pressure to bear on all sides... A propos<sup>1)</sup>, here I have my brother-in-law, allow me to introduce him, Miti Katundi, who is in a position to help us a lot in this respect...»

The major raised his eyebrows, turned his eyes towards the boy and asked rather coldly:

«Did they release the lad? Very well. We have nothing against the young people who at last return to the right path.»

«Secondo,» continued Mr. Banka addressing particularly the lawyer Meçe; «and this is of direct concern to you... We must create the impression through the press that there is a fundamental difference of views between social democracy and the Balli Kombëtar, and I should think that we could begin by attacking Mr. Kasimati for his well known intransigence. Terzio...»

«You can keep the *terzio* for yourself,» interrupted angrily Hajdar Bey who had not understood Mr. Banka's intentions. «Because I, as you may well know, am not more intransigent than the communists.»

«That is not essential. Hajdar Bey, please, don't get offended. It is important that the communists should recognize the social-democrats as a party which has broken all its previous links with the Balli Kombëtar. In the paper «Unity of the Nation» I will on the other hand attack the social democrats for their extremist views. I don't know if I expressed myself clearly.»

«Clear enough,» said the major, but he thought: «That is the same as to beat water in a mortar. But we don't risk to lose anything by it».

The lawyer leaned over to Mr. Banka and whispered something in his ear.

«That was the fourth and last point», said Mr. Banka raising his voice. «It was for this purpose that

---

1) A propos (fr.) — by the way; incidentally.

I brought my brother-in-law here. As a man of the communists, he will be able to arrange for us contacts with several party members, some of whom have responsible positions.»

«How is that?» the major was suddenly pricked by genuine interest. «Has the boy not signed the declaration of renouncement?»

«No, that is precisely the important point in my plan. Miti is rather fanatical in his convictions.» said Mr. Banka with a private wink to the major, with which he meant: «What is the need of a declaration, I have bound my brother-in-law hand and foot by other ways much more effective.»

Miti was racking his brain to work out a way of conduct to all what was being said about him. Indeed, the blunder he had made the night before was tormenting him, and he was particularly indignant at his brother-in-law for talking about him so boastfully as if he could use him like a marionette. He felt like flinging at Mr. Banka's face the phrase he had often read in «The People's Voice» «you are reckoning without your host» my dear brother-in-law.

But then he changed his mind. «Suppose I acted like that, what then? Everything will start from the beginning. Eqrem, who spared me from torture the first time, will at once hand me over to the major, and that fellow knows his business, ... particularly now that he is certain about my connections with the communists.»

His temples ached. He was breathing with difficulty. Another thought told him: «if you keep quiet you may find an opportunity to give these criminals the slip». But then he again reflected: «No, no! I can't leave the matter like that, without telling them first what I think of them.»

His reflections were disturbed by the women in the other room whom he could hear quite clearly. His sister's voice was the loudest. She was talking with

unrestrained hatred against the communists, blaming also their families which, in her opinion, ought to have dug the graves of their sons and daughters with their own hands as soon as the latter would give the slightest proof of sympathy for the National-Liberation Movement.

«Are you pleading your own case, my dear?» she was threateningly addressing one of the ladies who probably must have made an attempt to contradict her.

«No, Mrs. Banka», came the timid reply of the other lady. «I only said that I feared some innocent might suffer.» But her voice was immediately drowned by the hail of threats and accusations coming from Tefta.

The other women intervened to placate her, but Tefta gave them no chance, screaming and shouting for all she was worth.

«Am I not right, my little brother-in-law,» began Eqrem addressing Miti who had not been listening to him. «You are fanatical, you communists, aren't you», he had raised his voice in order to draw the attention of the men away from his wife's stupid talk.

Miti was preparing a reply when a piercing scream, which could only come from Tefta's throat, shook the house. It was followed by the noise of chairs being moved about and glassware falling on the floor.

«What is going on there?» asked Mr. Banka and rushed to the other room followed by Hajdar bey and the others.

«What is the matter?» shouted the old man dragging his huge slippers over the floor.

He saw Tefta coming towards him, her hair dishevelled and her makeup in disorder, screaming as if something terrible had happened to her.

«You may well ask what is the matter! They have brought a communist here to make her propaganda! It is that awful shameless woman!»

Complete disorder reigned in the room. Cups and

glasses were scattered all over the carpet, the women were all walking up and down talking all at the same time, trampling upon the broken glasses without care thus completing the breakage. Hajdar bey's wife was holding her head wailing: «Oh dear, my cups, my beautiful crystal service!»

Tefta was still screaming in the corridor:

«She dares accuse me of going to hotel Dajti with the Germans, the bitch!»

Miti craned his neck and saw in a corner of the room a woman holding her hands over her face, crying silently.

«Who is the communist among you?» asked Major Jahja threatening the ladies holding a revolver in his hand.

The uproar stopped immediately. The women stared at the major terrified. Tefta came behind the major, holding her head high, her eyes flashing with anger.

«There she is!» she said pointing at the woman in the corner. «It is that witch there!»

«She does not talk sense, Mr. major,» she said. «I have no idea what communism is and I came here on a quiet private business. I came...» she made an effort to hold back her tears. «They have arrested my brother Selami and nobody tells me where he is.»

Miti was moved by the woman's pitiful voice which sounded familiar to him, and when she mentioned the name Selami, a knot gathered in his throat and he drew back very much troubled.

### 3

After the woman, who went away without having a chance to make her complaint to Hajdar Bey, for

which purpose she had come, the other women followed suit. Some of them expressed the hope that God would not make it too hard for their boys «who had left the comfort of their homes to risk their lives down in the south», others complained that their sons, who were not of a fighting type, had been forced by the Germans to join the government forces. They would have gone on for much longer, but the major's angry look made them desist, cutting short their complaints with the words: «Well, since it is necessary for the good of the country we must not complain». The last one, an aged woman remained for a long time at the threshold of Hajdar Bey's house, the latter dressed in black and quite presentable, squeezing, her hand listening to her with a show of eager respect and affection.

«You understand these things better as you are well versed in these political matters,» she was saying. «But what am I to do? My daughter is all upset lately and poor Ajet is out of his mind. Be kind to me, Hajdar Bey, don't let them be involved in these matters; they are the only ones I have in this world.

Hajdar Bey had taken an attitude of earnest concern. Still holding her hand, he was reassuring her:

«Don't worry, my dear lady. Is it for Emira that you are asking me to help you? You know pretty well that I love her like my own child... despite what happened some time ago... Isn't that so?» he kept looking benignly at her for a moment, then changed his tone. «But you are right, you are Emira's mother. As long as they live, parents have in their mind nothing but their children. The same happens with me. I have my son, you know, Captain Petrit, a fine, handsome fellow in good health, lacking nothing. And there, at the command, they hold him on the palm of their hand. And yet, I am worried about him, I can't sleep in peace. Upon the honour of my country's flag, I am worrying

about him all the time. Just until I find him a nice bride, a girl after my heart's wish...»

Here Hajdar Bey gave the woman a significant look.

«If it is God's will, everything will be arranged for the best, Hajdar Bey,» sighed Mrs. Naime, «but first we have to wait until these latest troubles are over».

«They will be over, all right, don't you worry about that... They are sure to end soon and in our favour... You tell your daughter what I told you. Tell her that Hajdar Bey, that... It was in vain. Mrs. Naime pricked her ears waiting for him to finish his thought.

Hajdar Bey's eyes were fixed on a big luxury car with a small Albanian flag on its right headlight, which had pulled up in front of the gate. It was surely the minister's car, and Hajdar Bey had good reason to be surprised and to some extent concerned that a minister could come on a visit just like that, without warning, and find him in dressing gown and slippers.

He left Mrs. Velo without even saying good-bye and went in to make the necessary arrangements.

Meanwhile a young man, elegantly dressed in a grey suit and hat and holding a yellow leather bag under his arm, came out of the car. He addressed curtly to the guard who had come to the gate now standing at attention. Then he opened the bag, took out of it a sealed envelope and handed it to the guard saying. «Give this to Mr. Kasimati. Tell him it is from the minister and is very urgent».

The guard saluted and went in. Alert, dressed more elegantly than the minister himself, returned to the car and nodded to the driver to proceed.

The car had turned the corner when Major Jahja, a gun in his hand, rushed down the stairs like a mad man shouting: «A communist! It was a communist!»

There was a big commotion in the men's room. Miti taking advantage of the confusion slipped out unnoticed. Hajdar bey, not believing his eyes, put on his glasses and began to read what turned out to be not a letter from the minister but a tract of the Party which exposed the manoeuvres of the social democrats and the Balli Kombëtar. The paper remained shaking in his hand and his face became deathly pale when he read that the tract treated him personally as a stupid fool who continued to serve faithfully the nazis and to betray his own country... «But very soon the people's vengeance will fall without mercy on your head!» concluded the tract.

Even Mr. Meçe, though the tract did not mention him by name, felt that he was directly attacked by it.

Mr. Banka and his wife were standing aside and seemed unconcerned and rather amused. Tefta had come very close to her husband and was whispering something to him excitedly.

«You have nothing to fear, my dear,» said her husband trying to put her hair in order. «The communists have no accounts to settle with both of us.»

«And yet, I feel all cold when I think of their ways. Don't you see? Fancy that young man, coming here braving the guard and making us all look ridiculous. It is terrible, isn't it?»

«Eh, my dear Tefta! As if I haven't so very often told you! There are some bad people among us, bad people...»



## CHAPTER II

### 1

Major Jahja set on alarm all the town patrols and the armed guards of the ministries. The alarm spread about the streets, the shops and the coffee-house where mercenaries and all sorts of military men began to rush in and out like in a bee-hive. They ran in groups in all directions not knowing what exactly had happened.

In the German Komandature offices, in the police and the quisling gendarmerie, as well as from one ministry to another, the telephones were ringing nervously, orders were being given and received, precise information was being asked for.

«Give me the general director of the police!»

«It is occupied, your excellency.»

«Then give me the Ministry of Internal Affairs!»

«It does not reply.»

«Can't you tell me, then, what the devil has happened?»

«The communists, your excellency, they have surrounded the house of a bey it seems.»

More guards were sent to the squares and around crossroads. Patrols began to stop and question the passers-by and, as it was spread around that the communists were dressed like ministers, many high officials found themselves in trouble. The men of the Feldgendarmerie stopped three ministry cars with the ministers in them and would not listen to the explanations of the interpreters. In vain the personal guards of the ministers showed to the diffident Germans

the distinctive signs of the government officials. The Germans only shook their heads and with a curt «nein» proceeded with their lengthy control. They even suspected the gendarmes themselves and controlled their caps, their clothes, their pockets for hidden red stars and other signs of the dreaded «partisans».

In the confusion that prevailed, it was long before it became clear that there had been no armed communist attack but just a widespread distribution of tracts in all the quarters of the town. There the guards stopped and controlled everybody: ladies dressed and veiled in the muslim fashion as well as modern ones, old man dragging painfully their feet as well as small street urchins, state employees as well as street vendors.

## 2

Alert left the car before the alarm had reached the Germans and the quisling guards and ran to his base where he found Zef, but they had scarcely been two minutes together when they were given the signal that a massive control was under way in every part of the town. They hurried out and took the narrow street of Tinker No. 5 among the small house of the poor quarter that stretched to the eastern extremity of Tirana, upward the Hoxha Tahsin street.

«It is long since we were last there and we don't know in what state we will find the place,» remarked Zef with no particular intention.

«That is true, but we have no other choice,» replied Alert. We can go near the house and take a look at it before we decide what to do; we may meet some-

body and ask how things stand.» Then it occurred to him that Zef might have learned something new, so he asked him straight out:

«Have you heard anything new?»

«No.»

«Then we'd better go there.»

«All right.»

They had crossed the Bami street and were about to enter the Hoxha Tahsin street where they had to walk about two hundred meters before turning to the right to take a short — cut to their destination.

«You surprised me with your last remark,» said Alert.

«Why, I said it without any particular purpose.»

«Well, I only thought...»

Alert stopped to think. He was looking at a door carrying the number 120, which a week earlier had been indicated to him as a quite safe base, though no illegal had been sheltered there so far. The roar of motorcycles coming from the far end of the Hoxha Tahsin street made him take a quick decision.

«Let us get in here,» he said.

«Where here?» asked Zef, astonished.

«The first door of the street in front of us.»

Zef looked attentively at the narrow street and asked:

«And what do you make of the gendarme standing on guard in front of the next door? Don't you see him?»

«Of course I see him, but his duty there has nothing to do with us.» Then he caught Zef by the arm and led him quickly to the house.

The door with the number 120 was set a bit deeper inside than the other doors of the street and could not be seen by the guard. Alert rang the bell and entered without waiting for an answer. The yard in front of the house itself was quite spacious, covered with fine

gravel, with square patches of flowers here and there, and was surrounded by high walls in front as well as on both sides.

«As far as I know, this house has never been searched,» whispered Alert. «Here we must be safer than anywhere else. But I am not sure what the landlord will say to our visit.»

At that moment they saw a short stout man, completely bald and with a queer sidelong look coming towards them. His red boyish face made it difficult to tell his age.

«I have never seen his face,» murmured Alert. «Could he be the landlord?»

«Did you expect me to know?» asked Zef irritated who saw they were entering in the wrong box.

The man raised his hand over his eyes to shade them from the sun and looked at the two young men with calm attention. Alert stepped forward.

«We have been sent to you,» he said. «Perhaps you could accommodate us for tonight.» He mentioned a name which Zef had never heard before.

The man frowned and a deep line appeared in the middle of his forehead.

«Let us go in first, then we will explain who we are,» continued Alert.

The man shook his head annoyed as if wanting to say that he knew nothing of these matters but all the same he walked to the street door put the bolts in their place and led the guests to the house. The room they entered had its door on one side of the porch and seemed isolated from the rest of the house. The man was watching his guests deep in thoughts, saying nothing. His reddish face with almost colourless eyes and his somewhat suspicious look did not inspire confidence at first sight.

«You seem preoccupied,» smiled Alert. «Let us hope nothing unpleasant will happen.»

«So be it...» smiled at last the Bald Head.

The two comrades remained standing though the host had already invited them to sit down. The room was furnished with only a table, two chairs and a bed-spring arranged as a sofa. It had two large windows barred with thick iron rods, the one looking where only a wall could be seen, the other south over the yard and the wall separating the house from the villa of a quisling neighbour.

Zef did not seem satisfied and gave Alert a wink indicating that he would prefer to go away.

«What do you say?». Alert asked the man still smiling. «Shall we stay here or shall we look for some other place?»

The man raised his head abruptly.

«Yes of course! You will stay here. The other man who would agree to keep you will be an Albanian, just like me. Luckily, my wife and children are away, or they could have been a hindrance. It is the first time I receive visitors like you, and I hope there won't be a search tonight.»

«Have they ever been here before?» asked Alert.

«No.»

«How is it possible?»

The man turned his head aside and said with an apologetic smile.

«Well, it is just like that... They consider me to be one of theirs, it seems. I have been on friendly terms with some of the gendarmeries particularly with Major Jahja, and they don't seem to suspect me.»

Zef was still unconvinced and insisted to go, but he did not want to hurt the man's feelings and tried to explain his attitude with a flow of words. That sounded both grateful and at the same time reproaching.

«Thank you very much uncle. You have already done your duty. But we can't stay here. First, because your gendarmerie friends can never be trusted, however friendly they may appear, second... well, how can one be sure. The Germans may come instead of

Major Jahja's men, and they, as you know perfectly well, don't care whether you are a friend of the major or not.

The bald man's face darkened and he seemed disappointed.

«That's true. Thank you for being so frank with me. But let me tell you one thing. I, with this bald-head of mine, am not as bad as I may seem. And I have not been so stupid as to play the major's game. I wish I had the opportunity to prove it. You do as you like, but the man who sent you here somehow knows me».

After these words he lowered his eyes and began to fumble in his pocket for his tobacco pouch. Zef quickly offered him his own packet. The man lighted a cigarette and inhaled the smoke deeply.

«We will stay here tonight, no matter what my comrade says,» said Alert to please the man, after having observed him attentively, and looked at Zef with the conviction that they had to deal with a decent man.

«Don't get me wrong, uncle,» murmured Zef. «I did not mean to offend you. I only said that one can never trust the officers and gendarmes who are doing the Germans' dirty work, you know?»

«I will believe you only if you accept to stay in my home tonight,» said the man rather curtly.

Zef pulled off his cap and threw it on the bed-spring.

«If that is how you feel, we won't cross your wish,» he said. «We stay here.»

The man seemed to have expected that decision with some excitement; he straightened up his body and gave the two comrades a quite sympathetic look. There was satisfaction mingled with pride and frankness in that look.

«That's fine,» he smiled and walked to the win-

dow that looked to the east. Then he asked his guests to go near him and added. «Now I will show you an easy way you can get out of here in case of danger.»

The two comrades craned their necks but could see nothing. The iron grate of the window prevented them from seeing anything below it, and above the high opposite wall they could see only a white cloud in a patch of blue sky. The narrow strip between the house and the opposite wall was filled with neatly arranged stacks of wooden beams and iron bars.

«You will find it easy to go out through this window,» the landlord began to explain. «The only thing you need is to unscrew this little bolt here and you can raise the whole iron grate with one hand. The ground right under the window is free and you can climb down easily. The last to go out must lower the grate and screw the bolt back in its place.

«Then what?» asked Alert. «It won't be easy to go over that wall.»

«No, my son. I did not say you must go over the wall. You will crawl under it, if it comes to that. On the floor of this passage you will find a broad plank which you will move aside and uncover the entry to an underground gallery used as an air raid shelter during the Italo-Greek war. It goes under the foundations of the wall and reaches the other side into a ditch covered by shrubs where nobody can see you. It is quite safe, particularly at night.»

After that he proceeded to show the two comrades how it could be done in practice. He let the bolt loose, raised the iron grate and invited Alert to try it. The young man went out easily. Then he looked all over the place to see if anybody could be watching him from some neighbouring window, and when sure that everything was all right he returned inside, congratulated the «uncle» for having devised such an ingenious «Stalingrad» in the very walls of his house. Then he

instructed the landlord what to do in case he noticed something suspicious, how to knock at the door etc.

The man listened attentively and even asked Alert to repeat the parts that were not absolutely clear until he was sure to have understood everything.

When the landlord left them to themselves, Alert turned the key and began to report to his comrade upon his «interesting action» with the minister's car. At first he said he had no intention of undertaking such a risky adventure, but then he did not want to miss the unexpected opportunity. Then he spoke of the effect his «action» had had and expected Zef to embrace him joyfully.

But Zef on the contrary did not show great enthusiasm. Before speaking he lighted a cigarette as he often used to do whenever he intended to express a contrary opinion.

«Can't you realise that your action was wrong?» he said at last. His face showed no real disapproval but the words «your action was wrong» were sufficient to exasperate Alert.

«What was wrong with it? Ought I to have missed that golden chance?»

«I understand you, but you see only one side of the question, Comrade Alert, whereas I am worried about the other side of it.»

«Do you mean I have compromised myself?»

«Exactly. Doesn't that seem important to you!»

«It is important, but I have acted so carefully that I am sure nobody has recognized me. While the driver who took me around is a man who did it out of his own free will; he spares nothing for the Movement.

Zef put out his cigarette and asked:

«So you still think you can go on living and working like a legal state employee as before?»

«Yes, I do.»

«I think you are wrong, Comrade Alert. And that is exactly the weak point of your action. You carried out



an action which precludes you from any possibility of being as useful as you have been so far while being legal.»

«I don't think you are right,» objected Alert and would have continued, but at that moment they heard steps on the porch and someone knocked not in the way they had agreed with the landlord.

The two comrades looked at each other in silence.

The knocking was repeated, then they heard a low voice:

«Open, Comrade Alert. It is me, Kopani.»

«Kopani?» they both exclaimed at the same time.

«That is funny,» remarked Alert. «How could Kopani know that we are here?» and he hurried to open the door.

With his cap in his hand and his hair ruffled as if he had been crawling through thick bushes, Kopani came in wiping the sweat from his forehead and, without stopping to recover his breath, began to talk, but Alert interrupted him.

«Tell us first who told you that Zef and I were here?»

«I found it out myself,» replied Kopani without hesitation. «I saw you coming out of a luxury car and followed you. It was a good piece of luck that I saw you, else I would never have known you were here. I happen to know the landlord who is a relative of mine, but I have never had any advantage of this.»

Alert glanced at Zef, who was standing a little apart, smiling at Alert's illusion that nobody had recognized him in that car, then obviously nervous, he turned to Kopani:

«All right, we shall take note of your remarks and act accordingly another time, but now you'd better tell us why did you come here in such a hurry?»

«I came to tell you something unpleasant, Comrade Alert... You have been denounced, both of you, and now you must take the necessary steps...»

«Denounced? By whom?»

Zef came closer and looked attentively at Kopani who had lowered his eyes and seemed to find it hard to give the details.

«Are you sure of what you are saying?» asked Albert with a note of threat in his voice.

«Yes of course I am.»

«It is a fact,» said Kopani straightening up and looking in his comrade's eyes. «Miti Katundi, who was recently released from jail, has denounced you...»

He saw the comrades shrug their shoulders as they looked at each other and continued:

«I see that you don't believe me and you have good reason for that because Miti was not of that kind, but I have got facts about that now.» He was twisting nervously the cap he was still holding in his hands and, with his eyebrows locked together, told them that he and his friend Bimi had been passing by Agllai's house at the time when her daughter, «that Eqrem Banka's dirty whore» had begun shouting to her mother in a voice that they could clearly hear from the street: «You are a fool, she was saying. Miti has told them everything, even the names and surnames of the Alerts and Zef Moisius that you welcome to your house as well as the links they have with the rabble. Now, what are you waiting for? Do you want to be taken to the police, first get a good thrash there and only then talk?» Then from the very mouth of «Frau Tefta», as the German officers used to call Mrs. Banka, Kopani and Bimi had learned another thing. Eqrem Banka, who had interceded for Miti's release, was keeping the fellow with him, never losing sight of him. That had increased Kopani's and Bimi's suspicions.

«All right, Comrade Kopani, we shall look seriously into this matter,» said Zef with a sigh and turned to Albert.

«Did Miti know your real name?»

«He did.»

«And the office where you work?»

«Yes he knew it, too.»

«Then you can give up any thought of continuing your legal existence.»

Alert did not reply. It was clear this was no friendly advice on Zef's part but a strict order. In fact, Alert realised himself that Miti's indiscretions would have serious consequences. And it was not only that ingenious boy's blunder that rendered Alert's legal activity impossible, but also the other matter with the minister's car which had caused a big stir among the German and quisling authorities.

His thoughts were interrupted by Kopani.

«I am going now, Comrade Alert, but I want to repeat what I mentioned before: you haven't done well in choosing this base.»

«Why?»

«Because the landlord is my uncle. I know him well and I am sure he has never given proofs of being on our side. On the contrary, he is on very good terms with the quislings.»

«That is surprising,» remarked Zef with curiosity. «You have such an uncle and you have never mentioned it too.»

«Yes, he is my uncle, my mother's brother, but he has never treated us like his relations. He has lived most of his life in Egypt, working on the farm of a rich Tosk, and after having put aside some money he came back to Albania in 1938, bought some land and olive groves, built this house and began making friends with some people of the government... Only recently he has been showing some interest to my mother but, frankly, I don't trust him... This is the reason why I think you should not stay here. And there is also another reason. One of the neighbours here is an important quisling and, as far as Bimi and I have been able to find out, the houses of the quislings are well guarded, particularly after the latest communist attack against Hajdar bey.

Alert smiled and looked at Zef.

«The communist attack! What do you say to that? And what would they have done if the communists had launched an armed attack?»

Zef did not reply and seemed to be thinking of something else. The unexpected blockades that interrupted the links with the comrades were getting too frequent... Veli the messenger had not yet come back and the letter with the important information he had sent to the comrades at Peza remained still unanswered. Was it possible that they attached so little importance to such a serious matter as the plan of the German Komandature for a sudden raid on Peza? There ought to be some explanation. Either the messenger had met with an accident and the comrades had not received the letter or the Germans have encircled Peza so tightly that the comrades have no possibility of communicating with Tirana. That would also explain the silence of the other partisan detachments of the Tirana district though they had received orders to undertake diversive actions and prevent the Germans from launching all their forces against Peza.

He turned to Alert with a look of concern that was in full contrast with Alert's broad grin and said hesitatingly:

«You see Alert, the situation is not rosy at all... We sent the messenger many days ago, we have sent letters, we have given instructions, and there is still no answer to come... It is not so simple as it might seem, and I think that the first thing we ought to do is to re-establish our links with Peza... This very day, I mean... Do you think it would be possible?»

Alert passed his hand over his forehead and replied:

«It won't be easy but we can try, and you may be sure we will do our best.» Then he turned to Kopani who was still meditating over what Zef had said about the difficult situation.

«Can you find Bimi just now? He has two com-

rades in his cell who must certainly be able to find a way to reach Peza," he said.

Kopani hit his chest with his fist and said....

"I will take care of that. I left Bimi about half an hour ago and he told me where he was going.\* And I am sure to find him even if he has gone somewhere else... Shall I bring him here?"

"No, not here! By no means!" replied Zef. "I will give you a message for him." He sat down and jotted a few words on a leaf from his notebook.

"Don't forget to let us know what you have done," said Alert. "It is very important."

Kopani nodded and reached to take the message that Zef was handing to him.

At that moment they heard the street door open and close again, then the crunch of hobnailed boots on the grave came and a rough man's voice asking: "Is there any other entrance at the back of you house?"

Kopani peeped from behind the curtain of the window overlooking the yard and recognized the well known sergeant Brahja of the quisling gendarmerie.

"No, why are you asking?" came the landlord's voice from the porch.

"It is none of your business," replied the sergeant gruffly and went out leaving the door open implying that he would be back pretty soon.

Kopani drew back from the window and, trying to conceal his uneasiness, said to the two comrades:

"I don't like this affair at all! What the devil made sergeant Brahja come here?"

He would have gone on, but at that moment the landlord, coming in a hurry, knocked cautiously at the door and whispered through the keyhole: "Open!"

They opened the door and he came in pale in his face. When he noticed Kopani he glared at him with angry astonishment.

"Uncle, I am sorry; I forgot to bolt the door," said Kopani.

«You forgot! Bravo! And what shall we do now?»

«We are going immediately, don't worry.»

The landlord looked at his nephew with contempt.

«You can go easily, you, who are of the family, and they know you, but what about these two here. It is I who am responsible for them. The street is swarming with gendarmes and sergeant Brahja is with them... But they don't seem to have come for us... It must be for that gentleman there,» he pointed at the house of his quisling neighbour.

### CHAPTER III

#### 1

By afternoon the Philosopher had run all the errands Alert had sent him on. Only at the No. 5 house, Tinker's street, he had met with some difficulties, three times he had passed in front of it and seen the big lock on the outside. But the fourth time he succeeded. Drita, who had come to see who was knocking, recognized him immediately, and there was no need for him to repeat the whole password which he had learned by heart.

«You are late, my boy,» she reproached him with a playful smile before he could say what he wanted.

«Late, My God!» the boy exclaimed. nearly drop-

ping the paper horns of almonds he was carrying not in a basket hut in his hands. «I have been here three times before but found the door was locked from outside. What could I do?»

Drita laughed and tried to reassure him.

«I was only joking, don't worry. Mother and I already knew what Alert wanted today and took the necessary measures.»

The Philosopher sauntered off satisfied and within few minutes he found himself in the center of the town.

A big car with four or five men inside, one of them dressed in the uniform of a German officer, stopped in front of the Continental hotel. The men got out, put their hats and jackets in order and walked towards the door. Among them the Philosopher recognized Galip bey dressed up as if for a special occasion. The boy noticed that the bey was wearing a new black hat which was too small for his big head.

As the others passed through the door, Galip bey and the German officer remained outside, apparently to exchange some words in private. The Philosopher ran towards the car advertizing his ware with his shrill cry:

«Almonds, gentlemen, fine salted almonds!»

He kept his eyes on the driver, who had lighted a cigarette and was looking annoyed at the street in front of him. The driver paid no attention to the boy who was admiring the shining glass and metal of the car and the red plush upholstery of its seats.

«This matter can't be put off any longer... On Sunday we are expecting you at Lushnja,» was saying the officer to Galip Bey in Albanian.

The bey stood still for a while, as if calculating something.

«Certainly» he said at last. «On Sunday I will finish all I have to do in Tirana».

«Very well, then,» said the officer contentedly. «On

Sunday at eight o'clock in the morning the car will be waiting for you here in front of the hotel».

Then he turned to the driver and gave him some order. The Philosopher withdrew a little to one side, stepped on the sidewalk and came slowly behind the two men.

«We will take the short cut by the Beshiri brigde», added the officer. «As for your safety, you can leave that to me. We shall be well guarded.»

Galip Bey's face brightened up.

«That's all right, then!»

The officer shook hands with the bey and got into the car. The Philosopher was sure that he had seen the officer's face before. Yes. He was the same young man who a week before in Berlin Café had frightened and silenced all those Ballists with a few words he had pronounced. But this time he was dressed as a German. A minute later the car was gliding towards the square of the ministries. The Philosopher ran after it for a moment repeating to himself the number of its license plate: «Two-two eight-nine...»

## 2

Arta was surprised as she looked through the key-hole of the street door, to see the Philosopher knocking at a time when she was not expecting him, and her first thought was that something had gone wrong.

«What is the matter?» she asked letting him in.

«Nothing. Here is e message for Alert,» he said handing her a small black slate on which he had scratched with the point of a nail the number of the car.

Arta read it but could not understand what it meant.



«You just note it down, Alert knows what it is.» Then, when she had copied the number on a piece of paper, he added, «You can tell Comrade Alert that this is the number of the car... The car by which Galip Bey and some of his quisling friends will travel to Lushnja... They will start on Sunday morning at eight o'clock and will pass by the Beshiri bridge... That is what you have to tell him, he knows the rest... Can you remember it?»

Arta repeated what the boy had said and noted it down on the paper.

«It is very important, don't forget it,» he said and bidding her good night ran out into the street.

Arta remained at the half closed door looking after the boy, smiling at him until he turned his head for the last time, greeted her and disappeared. Then she shut the door and went inside.

All day long she had walked through many quarters and streets which she did not know very well and had got very tired. She had gathered less information and letters than usual, had distributed part of the tracts that had been printed with cyclostyle last night and now was waiting for Alert. Two days had passed since she had seen him for the last time, but they knew each others' situation. That afternoon she had learned about the reckless courage of her husband, who had distributed tracts among some of the most dangerous reactionaries by using the minister's car and she was sure that now he had to go underground. Actually it was better for Alert to go underground than continue his usual life of a clerk, exposed to the danger of being captured from moment to moment. But his going underground had its bad sides too; Arta also would be obliged to leave the house; it was inevitable. Then what would happen to poor grandmother? How would she live the remaining days of her life? Her situation would become worse and worse with each passing day. And what could Arta do for her? She would ask the neigh-

bours of course to look after her, for bread and water if nothing else.

The girl thought over everything and came to the conclusion that Alert's going underground should not be put off any longer. «Of course, he must have talked it over with Zef,» she thought. «And if Zef had thought it as the most reasonable thing to do then Alert must act accordingly. Then why do I rack my brain so much about it?»

She sat down on a couch near the fireplace of the kitchen where mother Sadete had covered into the ash two small fire woods which kept the fire still going on. She uncovered and stored them, kindled the fire properly and put the kettle half with water, to boil a handful of rice she found on the corner of a box in which the old woman kept provisions. The old woman would bring a plate of sour milk too and so supper would be ready.

Arta looked at her watch and was surprised to see that it was already half past five and there was still no sign of Alert who had sent her word that he would be home that night. She was not worried too much about Alert and Kopani who could have been delayed at some meeting and decided to sleep somewhere else, but why was mother Sadete so late? «Even she, poor thing, is doing her part of illegal activity», thought the girl. «She has been wandering all day to run the errands of the comrades and perhaps some patrol has surprised her, obliging her to take refuge in some house to escape from the hands of those beasts.»

Only twenty-five minutes remained before the curfew hour. It would be awkward if the girl remained alone in that house which did not belong to her. At first the thought did not disturb her very much, but then she began to be worried in earnest. It was easy for her to look all the doors from inside, go down to their hiding place in the basement and pass the night there. Even if a search party came, they could

not find her. But suppose there was something to happen? Alert or Kopani for instance, or some other illegal comrade might come after the curfew hour, and knock lightly at the door but find nobody to answer them. No, no! It wasn't right for Arta to think only of her own safety.

She put some rice to cook in a kettle on the fire-place and went to the door to see if someone was showing up in the street. She saw mother Sadete limping on a walking stick which she must have borrowed somewhere.

As soon as the old woman was in the yard, she threw the stick behind the door, took off the upper piece of her *çarçaf*<sup>1</sup> which made her feel hot, and threw herself in Arta's arms.

«They have gone mad, mad the beasts!» she cried still out of breath. «But let them do their worst. They can't find what they are searching for and stop innocent people at random in the street. But I gave them the slip!»

Turning her head right and left to make sure that nobody was listening, she described gasping how she had succeeded in delivering the tracts to the two places that Kopani had told her. She had delivered them in the morning, and in the milk shop at the Old Marketplace they had given her a «very important letter for a comrade named Alert». It was that letter that had caused her all the trouble. She had first hidden it in her stocking but then thought it not safe enough. Then she wanted to put it in her shoe, but they told her that the shoes were the first place the Germans searched. The old woman had been at a loss what to do at a time when she ought to have left the shop.

Then a boy, who appeared to be an apprentice at the shop, noticed her embarrassment and said: «You

---

1) *Çarçaf* — a Moslem woman's dress combining a short light cloak, and a long skirt.

have the best place one could wish to hide such a letter, mother.» and he pointed at the detached sole of her left shoe. «Give me that letter and take off your shoe.» She handed him both. The letter was in a small envelope which the boy placed easily into the empty space, then he found some small nails and with the bronze weight of the balance nailed the sole with the skill of an experienced shoemaker. The result was perfect, but all the same as she walked along the street the old woman could not take her eyes off her left foot. She had been told that the Germans were very clever in finding out secrets. They watched you to see if you would make an unusual involuntary movement and reveal where you were hiding your secret. That is why the old woman was making desperate efforts to keep her eyes away from her feet, but every now and then they returned to her left shoe. She had reached the Red Hill Street and the danger seemed to have passed. She was about to turn into the house of a cousin of hers for a short visit and was already knocking at the door when some men rushed into the street, «some of those devils», Ballists and Germans mixed together, who «ran like mad, with their rifles dangling across their shoulders». They stopped a man with a bag and took him along, then they stopped another one, an old man who could scarcely manage to walk, they pulled off his jacket from him and searched every one of his pockets. Then they shouted to all the others to stay where they were.

Mother Sadete had knocked only once and dared not knock again. But she stood waiting for someone to open the door. As nobody was coming, she was obliged to stay in front of the door and watch what was happening. She looked once more at her shoe and, finding it in order, swore no to look at it again. She turned her eyes to one side and was astonished at the sight of the commotion which was going on. Men and women who came out of their houses to go about their own business tried to return when they saw the

scene in the steets, but the Ballists pointed their guns at them and ordered them to stand by the wall and raise up their hands.

Two of the «devils» the streets were now swarming with, came in front of the old woman.

«Have you come out to enjoy the sight?» asked one of them cocking his head impertinently to one side. He was a short youngish man with rare pale hair on his withered face that made him look older than he was.

His companion was turning his head around from time to time and was continually passing his tongue over his lips as if their dryness was disturbing him.

«I came here to see my cousin...» began the old woman keeping her eyes lowered. «but I found the door locked, that is why I am here.»

«That is why you are here!» sneered the man with the shrunken face. And why don't you look up when you speak to me? Does it hurt your eyes to look at a nationalist?»

The old woman felt a wake of heat spread over her body, but she made an effort to keep herself calm and, pretending to take the man's remark as a joke, she said laughing.

«I know nothing about these things, my son, but we Moslem women have been taught that it is improper for us to look a man in his eyes, even when we are old.»

«All right, all right. ... Where do you live?»

«Up there, by the hospital,» lied the old woman.

«Why did you come to your cousin?»

«Just to see her. She is of my own family.»

The Ballist turned to his companion and raised his eyebrows as if to ask him what he ought to do.

«Let us search her,» said the other gravely. «You can never trust the likes of her. They all pretend to be innocent. And without losing any more time he stepped towards her and barked at her:

«Take off your clothes, you Moslem old woman!»

«How can I take off my clothes?» said the old woman with a frown.

«How to take them off? Let me show you how.» He stretched his hand and pulled off the upper piece of her çarçaf. «Take off this first then your skirt, then the rest.»

Mother Sadete covered her face with her hands.

«Take them off, I tell you!» threatened the second Ballist.

The old woman remained with her hands over her face as the man began to unbutton her dress and search her. Then feeling shame and indignation, she began to defend herself with her hands and to reprove them:

«What are you doing, you boys? Aren't you ashamed of yourselves? Have you no mothers? Help me, oh God!» and she stumbled as she tried to step back.

Then one of the Ballists caught her by the arms and held her firmly against the wall, while the other went thoroughly through her clothes ending with her shoes and stockings. When he took off her shoes, the old woman felt so weak that she became pale like a candle, closed her eyes and almost fainted. Feeling her limp in his hands, the man that was holding her said:

«Let the old witch alone now, she may die in our hands.»

The other, finding nothing inside her shoes, threw them on the ground and grumbled:

«You are an old communist witch, you, I can see it in your eyes. But what can I do? Had I found one of those tracts on you, one of the tracts you go distributing right and left, then I would have given you something to remember all your life.»

Mother Sadete described the whole incident hurriedly, hardly stopping to take her breath, while Arta stood looking at her fixedly.

The kettle on the fire was boiling over, but they paid no attention to it.

When the old woman finished her story she took off her shoes, removed with a pair of pincers the small nails, pulled out the small envelope and handed it to Arta. On the envelope, Arta read the words: «To be delivered the same day».

2

In the silence that followed they heard a soft knocking at the door which was repeated twice. The mother, having recognized her son's way of knocking, went to open the door without asking who it was. Kopani did not say even «good evening», as he always did, but ran up the stairs to the kitchen where he found Arta. He greeted her with a nod of his head.

«So you are here?» he asked.

«Yes, here, Wasn't that what we decided this morning?»

«Ah, yes,» remembered Kopani.

Arta looked at him with concern and curiosity.

«Have you received some bad news that you look so queer?»

«No, nothing, but I am worried.»

«Personal worries?»

«Personal?! Can there be anything personal in times like these?»

Arta did not like his way of talking, but she found it wiser to keep silent and wait until Kopani himself decided to tell her what was bothering him. But as he seemed determined to say nothing, she asked again:

«Something has gone wrong with you, comrade, why don't you tell me frankly what has happened?»

He gave her a look of despair.

«They have discovered the identity of Zef and Alert», he blurted out, «that is what has happened.»

«Nothing else?»

The girl's pale face, the drops of perspiration that broke out on her forehead, her words coming with a weak whisper, made Kopani feel more down-hearted than he was when he came.

«Well ... Nothing has happened yet. But from now on Zef and Alert are in real danger. They can no longer move as freely as they used to before, and they will have to be extremely careful because the enemy will track them without mercy. That is why I am so worried. There is no other reason.»

«Let us hope there isn't,» smiled Arta half-heartedly, and he could see that she still suspected he had not told her everything.

Kopani got to his feet and began to walk about the house searching. In a corner of a closet where they kept things that were no longer used he found a pair of old summer shoes, a cap of the «qeleshe» kind worn by the peasants, and put them aside.

«You must be in great trouble this time, Comrade Kopani,» remarked the girl mockingly. «That is why you are so discreet.»

He did not reply. He only gave her a dejected look and turned his head aside.

«Or perhaps they have allowed you at last to go underground and you are making preparations for a big action,» she continued to tease him. «Many congratulations. You have succeeded in getting rid of that noisome technical work down there in that stuffy basement.»

Kopani kept silent but he was boiling from within, being obliged to keep from her so many things he wanted to tell her. In fact he was not obliged to keep it secret and he knew that Arta was one of the most trusted comrades of the Party, that she was perhaps a member of one of its higher forums, but he did not



want to make her feel miserable by telling her all what had happened that day.

He had spent the whole afternoon looking for Bimi and had not found him. When he was coming back his heart heavy with the weight of failure, the worst had happened. He had entered the narrow street of his uncle's house without noticing that it was surrounded by a ring of gendarmes. In the yard he could hear his uncle's deep voice talking to the quislings as if he was doing his best to help them in their search. Kopani felt himself caught in a tight corner. To dash for safety? It could not be done. He would attract the gendarmes' attention and they would arrest him then and there . . . To stay where he was? That wouldn't do either. But of course, he could tell them that he had come to his uncle on family matters and find some excuse on the spot . . . He stood thinking for a moment. But could he tell what sort of troubles might the quislings bring up for him. Still, the second solution seemed more acceptable.

The guard at the door asked him what he wanted.

«I want my uncle. I have an urgent business with him.» He said these words with all the self-assurance he could manage and loud enough for his uncle to hear him. A minute later his uncle's bald head appeared from behind the door, his face expressing surprise and concern. He listened to Kopani and his sidelong look indicated that his nephew could not have chosen a worse moment to come to him.

«Mother is very ill,» said Kopani plaintively.

The man's face became a shade darker.

«Sadete? Is it possible? What happened to her? Haven't you sent for a doctor?»

The boy glanced at the gendarme pretending to be ashamed to speak in front of him. He lowered his eyes and murmured:

«No, we don't have any money.»

«Eh...» sighed the old man. «Come in, then, come in.» And he led his nephew into the yard.

«Are the comrades still here?» Kopani asked as soon as he was sure that nobody could hear him.

The uncle hesitated a moment, then spoke more kindly.

«I knew that it was about your comrades that you were worrying about, you devil... They are here all right, here, but they must leave tonight and as you can see for yourself, it won't be easy. Anyhow, tonight or early in the morning we will find a way to get them out... There is that underground gallery that emerges on the other side of the wall... You see what I mean?»

A gendarme came close to them looking for something on the ground. The uncle took two five franc notes from his pocket and gave them to Kopani, as he accompanied him to the door. The boy had no chance to tell his uncle about the promise he had made to his comrades which he had not kept. What would they think of him now?...

Arta was watching him from the corner of her eye, thoughtful and silent. She did not want to show her trouble about Alert and Zef, but in the end she could not help speaking.

«You seem decided to keep your secret. But I also have good reasons to be worried. Mother Sadete has brought a letter for Alert. It comes from Peza and the note on the envelope says that it must be delivered within the day.»

Kopani raised his eyes with sudden interest.

«What? You have a letter from Peza and you say nothing?»

«What can I say? You gave me no chance with those mysterious airs of yours.»

«Mysterious, nothing! I am bursting with anger that I have been looking in every corner of the town to find somebody and send him to Peza but couldn't

find anybody. What do you think I am making these preparations for? For nothing? I have to go myself and do the job the comrades are expecting to be done, but I can't leave before morning . . .

«It is a childish thought,» said Arta.

«It may be childish but I have no other choice.»

The boy sounded angry. Then, looking aside and lowering his voice he added: «This letter from Peza is making things more complicated. Perhaps it gives the answer to the questions my comrades wanted to ask. In that case . . .»

He turned to Arta as if expecting her to give him advice.

«Can't we open the letter and see what it says?» he asked.

«All right. I will open it on my own responsibility,» she agreed.

The first part of the letter was about the two intellectuals whom Zef had sent to Peza. They had arrived in time and were immediately sent to the South. The messenger Veli had been wounded while trying to evade the Germans. There had been a clash with a small German force which had been obliged to retreat leaving two dead. Then the letter requested that a member of the district committee, preferably Comrade Zef himself, should go to Peza about a matter that could not wait.

«You see?» exclaimed Kopani. «This letter should have been delivered to the comrades this very day.» Then he looked at his watch and added dejectedly. «It's of no use now. It is too late.»

«Too late,» murmured Arta who could guess what his comrade meant.

Through the thin curtain that separated the room from the kitchen Kopani could see his mother taking off the kettle from the fire and setting the table for supper.

«Enough with your never ending talk. Won't you come and have something to eat?» said the old woman

from behind the curtain. Her withered face, covered with drops of perspiration, had taken its usual expression of mild amusement.

The two young people walked slowly and almost reluctantly towards the kitchen.

«So, we can find no solution,» Arta shook her head with disappointment. «If it were only an hour earlier! ...»

«I have made up my mind,» said Kopani suddenly.

«What have you decided?»

«I will take that letter to the comrades now.»

Arta stepped back in surprise.

«You can't do it. The streets are swarming with Germans and they will stop you as soon as you are out.»

There was a short pause. Mother Sadete, who could not fail to understand her son's intentions, was staring at him in despair, her face pale, her lips trembling, but no sound coming from her mouth. Even when Arta and Kopani sat down at the table, she could not manage to say the usual words of welcome to her guest.

«What is wrong with you, mother?» asked Kopani. «Do you mean I have been wrong in bragging about your courage to the comrades?»

The old woman opened her eyes wide as if making an effort to stay awake.

«It is true. I am afraid. I have nobody but you in the world and I feel terrible. Is it reasonable for you to go out right into the hands of those hangmen? Today I saw them with my own eyes ... They were no better than wild beasts.»

«Eh, we haven't told you what they did to her today, how they treated her,» said Arta. «And yet, though she had on her that dangerous letter, she did not lose her courage and behaved like a man.»

When the old woman finished serving the meal, Arta described to Kopani some of the details of the day's search, trying to gradually change the mood of the small gathering by emphasizing the funny side of

the experience, which made Kopani laugh loudly and even Sadete was smiling. But Kopani could still not get over the disappointment his mother had caused him by showing her fear.

«It is all true what you are saying Artá, but the fact remains that mother is a revolutionary full of contradictions. She does her duty so well that she convinces you that she is a resolute woman, but then all of a sudden she shows signs of weakness and shames you. Tonight for example ...»

«But you are her son, don't you realise what that means?» Artá made an attempt to defend the old woman.

«Her son, yes, but I am not one of those bourgeois boys who cling to their mothers' skirts until they are married.»

«Listen to him!» said his mother with mock anger. «I don't remember to have ever kept you by my side, particularly to meddle in your affairs. I am worried, yes. But is there a mother who does not worry about her child. Even today...»

Kopani did not let her finish her thoughts; he jumped to her feet, pushed back his plate and said to Artá.

«Give me that letter.»

«Why should I give it to you?» the girl protested but drew the letter out of her pocket and handed it to him. «Here, take it. But you should not take such a risk.»

«That is my business.»

«Why don't you wait till dawn, when the curfew is over?» insisted Artá trying to conceal her great trouble.

«By no means!» Kopani seemed so resolute that any further attempt to stop him was useless.

When he saw the girl hesitate he smiled and gave her his hand. Artá instinctive jumped up and embraced him, trying to say something, but her mouth was too dry for speech.

At the threshold Kopani stopped for a moment, mother Sadete could not restrain her emotion any longer; she rushed to her son, threw her arms round his neck and began to cry:

«My son, my dear little boy! What are you going to do...?»

He looked at her sternly, as she had never seen him look at her before, and she felt so weak that she could hardly stand on her feet.

«My son!» she repeated through her tears. She let her arms drop by her sides like the wings of a wounded bird, and could scarcely feel her son's hands which were caressing her; she heard his voice as if coming from very far «Don't go on like that, mother. Is anything more disgraceful than to let down your own comrades?»

Mother Sadete, opened her eyes and looked around as if waking from a bad dream. Then she drew a deep breath, pulled herself together and said.

«If it is so serious as that, then I wish you good luck, my son. Let your mother see you off as far as the street door.»

Kopani's face brightened. He put his arm round her waist and walked with her across the yard. Arta followed a few steps behind them.

## CHAPTER IX

«Comrades,

Before we proceed, let us honour with a minute's

silence the memory of our late comrade X. Y. known to most of you by the pseudonym of Kopani».

The voice of Zef Moisiu sounded heavy under the low wooden ceiling of a recently white-washed small ground-floor room. His face, as if cast in bronze, with the deep lines of the forehead and the eyes raised high, seemed to support with difficulty the stern gaze of the comrades that expressed the profound pain of their wounded hearts.

With a short grating sound of moved chairs the comrades rose to their feet, their faces looking straight ahead, their arms hanging limp by their sides, silent like statues. Only Arta had hidden her face behind Alert and was weeping in short suppressed gasps.

Zef closed the minute of silence with the words: «May his memory live forever», and was about to sit down but seeing Arta crying he continued:

«You are crying, Comrade Arta? You shouldn't do this. We all feel like crying for our comrade, but we have to hold back our tears. He gave his life like a true communist while accomplishing his duty, as the Party has taught her sons to die, with arms in hand... He was fighting with a German patrol which had sighted him just after he had carried out an important party task with the courage of a communist under the present circumstances that we, all of us, know very well. Wounded to death he crawled more than a hundred meters from the place of the incident in order to destroy the document he was carrying, a letter from the District committee containing important secret information. And he did it just before he died. Can death be more beautiful than that? No, comrades, tears for heroes like him are out of place...»

He pronounced these last words with an altered, more resounding voice, accompanying them with gestures as if he were trying to pluck out of their hearts the pain that had taken hold of them, to wipe from

their faces the shadow of sorrow cast on them by their comrade's death.

Arta, who was under the impression that these remarks were addressed only to her, wiped off her tears and glanced shamefacedly at the comrades. The others too were trying to overcome their emotion and began to whisper to one another. Some of them pulled notebooks and pieces of paper from their pockets to keep notes during the meeting.

2

«Let us pass now to the items of the agenda,» Zef continued after a short pause. «You know that our work in Tirana is getting increasingly difficult. The enemies are taking extraordinary measures, but it is obvious that these are their last efforts. They clearly realise that the day when they will have to render account for their crimes is approaching. However, their activity is becoming too great a hindrance and we are obliged to change tactics. Many of our cadres, among them some comrades of the District committee, have to leave Tirana, others have gone underground. It is now necessary to replace them with others, certainly less experienced, but who will be sure to spare no effort to do their duty properly. So we have thought that several of the older party members and some of the new ones who have given good account of themselves (like Deko, who was recently admitted to the Party) could be promoted to higher responsibilities.

Hearing the name of Deko, Arta stirred in her seat and turned to Zef:

«Did you say Deko? But what about all that was



said about him at a meeting of the District committee? Was he cleared?»

«Yes, Comrade Arta. Piciruku was right to defend Deko as he did. In fact the enemy was discovered elsewhere...but later about that...Is there any other question?»

«No.»

«Then let us hear Alert who will read some proposals that we wanted to put before the meeting.»

Alert began by giving a detailed account of the situation in the party: «The mass arrests, the departure of many comrades to the liberated zones of the country or going underground have depleted our ranks and a number of cells have lost contact with the District committee. This has occurred mostly among the cells and the educational groups that were under their patronage. So it is not a matter of substituting two or three comrades but a large number of communists responsible for the cells and the educational groups. I have here a list of names who in our opinion, can replace the missing comrades. Of course, if the list is accepted, the cells must meet separately and hold regular elections... Another important problem is to establish new bases for our meetings and new links among them, as well as new places where we can keep our illegal tracts and brochures, the materials gathered as aid, our arms and other military material. This is absolutely necessary since most of our old bases have been discovered and have become unserviceable».

Alert read the names of the comrades and the posts for which they were proposed, taking for each of them the opinion of the meeting. The list was approved with few changes. Then, after long discussions, the new bases were decided upon as well as the comrades who were to arrange the contacts among them. A particular responsibility fell on Arta, who from that day would have to live separated not only from Alert but also from her grand-mother.

At the second item of the agenda, «communications», Zef told the comrades that a low act of provocation, which could have been very harmful to the Party, had lately been unmasked.

«Ismail Dalipi, a former sympathizer of the movement and a member of the educational group led by Shtëllunga who two months previously had been admitted as a party member, after having arranged at his house for Shtëllunga to be surprised by a group of SS soldiers and being convinced that Shtëllunga was dead (in fact he had survived the tortures and the wounds he had received) and that nobody knew anything about his treason, put himself at the disposal of the enemy. By concrete instructions from the Komandature and pretending to have had a narrow escape from the encirclement in which Shtëllunga had been trapped, he joined a party of young communists who were on their way to Peza. The comrades knew him for a reliable element, and the serpent would have build up a comfortable lair for himself in the Party,» continued Zef, «if the few words Shtëllunga had managed to pronounce in prison had not roused our suspicions. We immediately sent word to the commanders of the «Dajti» and «Kruja-Ishëm» battalions and to the comrades in Peza. Yesterday we were informed by Peza that our warning had been very useful. The suspected person had been identified and from the first questions he had contradicted his former declarations. Faced with irrefutable facts and being assured that a frank confession would attenuate his guilt, he admitted that he had given to the German the list of comrades he knew (in all 20 names) and of the houses where meetings were held. The houses that had been searched by the Germans these last days correspond exactly with the addresses he had given...»

Zef paused. The participants began to whisper to each other. Some seemed astonished, others were scandalized, some others found Zef's report on the matter incomplete. In a low whisper Arta asked Alert: «What do you think of it? Is it possible that he alone was the traitor in that affair? Could he not be in association with others?»

Alert did not reply. He turned to Zef.

«They don't appear satisfied, Comrade Zef. They want more facts and details. Why don't we read to them that letter? We have plenty of time.»

«Why not?» Zef glanced at the comrades who were looking at him anxiously and, searching in the pile of papers on the table before him, he found some sheets of paper sewn together and filled on both sides with a fine handwriting. «As a matter of fact,» he said, «this is not a letter but the unofficial minutes of a trial with all its details. Our comrade Rexha was present at the proceedings and has taken down everything that was said. We had known Rexha for his talent in technical matters, but he proved to be gifted in other fields too. You can judge for yourself. I shall leave out the first part, which is also quite interesting (it gives Rexha's impressions of the first partisan trial which he had witnessed), and read only the part that interests us directly. Listen:

*«What made you leave Tirana?» (the commissar asked the agent provocateur).*

*«I was frightened, comrade commissar. The Germans surprised me together with a comrade at my house. They killed the other fellow and I escaped by a miracle. I could not stay any longer in Tirana.»*

*«What was your comrade's name?»*

*«Shtëllunga. He was responsible of the cell to which I had been admitted as party member.»*

*«Very well. Did you speak with any of your party comrades about your intention to leave Tirana?»*

*«No. I could not find one. I did not even take leave*

of my own people. There was too much trouble in Tirana at that time, comrade commissar.»

«We have information that you were in good terms with the Germans who encircled your house that night. What can you tell us about that?»

«I, in good terms with Germans? That is...» (here the accused lost some of his self-confidence).

«Don't bother about that. We have enough evidence to prove it. You'd rather tell us what did the Germans expect from you. That is in the interest of the Party, and in yours too. Don't you understand? It depends on you to repair with your sincerity the damage you have done to yourself... speak...»

(The agent provocateur appears confused, he hesitates, then begins to talk with difficulty).

«I am innocent, comrade commissar. At first I was ashamed to tell the whole truth about what happened, but I assure you that I am innocent... Now I will tell everything... I could not resist like Shtëllunga. I was unarmed, and so the Germans caught me alive...»

«Alive? Yes, of course, we know about that. Then what happened?»

«They wanted to shoot me on the spot...»

«But they didn't. That also we know. What else?»

«Well, they let me live on one condition; they wanted me to become a spy at their service, to join the partisans and to send them the information they needed.»

«And did you accept that condition?»

«I accepted it to save my life, but I did not intend to act on it. And now here I am at your disposal.»

«Very well. Why didn't you tell that to us at the very beginning?»

«I did not dare, comrade commissar. I was ashamed.»

«So, you were ashamed... Very well. Let us sup-

pose it is so, though it is hard to believe. With whom did you travel from Tirana to Peza?"

"With Piciruku, Rexha, with a humorous old man from Kosova whom they called Uncle Jazi, and with a wounded messenger."

"A wounded messenger, you say. Did you know him?"

"Yes."

"And you gave no sign of knowing him though you travelled with him the whole night. You did not say a word when the others congratulated him for his heroism. You found an excuse to keep out of his sight. Why?"

"..."

"Tell us now, when did you last meet the messenger Veli?"

"I don't remember."

"How is it possible? He saluted you and you smiled at him when you saw him dressed as a peasant. Not only that, but you warned him with a gesture to take care of himself. That was five days ago, at Lapraka. You were just coming out of the house of that gentleman who, as far as we know, makes propaganda for the National-Liberation Movement during the day, and receives officers of the German Komandature at his home during the night. Am I not right?"

(The accused catches his head with both hands; he looks very pale; he seems at a loss what to say. He asks for a short respite which is accorded to him. After ten minutes outside, he is again called in the tent, and the interrogation continues).

The commissar: "Now I hope you feel well enough and can answer."

Defendant: "Yes, comrade commissar."

Commissar: "Tell us then, what were your relations with that gentleman?"

Defendant: "With Mr. Backa? He is a despicable

person, comrade commissar. I am going to tell you everything, everything. But you must believe me, I am innocent. I was led astray by love... Yes, love! I had fallen in love with that man's daughter and she loved me too. The father knew me only as the son of one of his friends with whom he did some business, but he knew nothing about my rupture with my father. One evening he surprised us as we were kissing behind the house and made a terrible fuss about it. He wanted to deliver me to the Germans, whom we could hear in a room upstairs, and he would not listen even to his daughter who cried and implored him to leave me alone and threatened to kill herself if anything happened to me. Then suddenly Safet Bey changed his mind and said to me: 'Listen, I will never consent to give my daughter to a communist, even if the world should turn upside down. If you renounce your political convictions and allegiances, then maybe we can come to some understanding'. It was then that I realised that he belonged a hundred percent to the Germans. I gave him my word so as to obtain his consent to our marriage but did not mean to keep it. But then he asked me to sign a written declaration. What could I do? There were those Germans there, in that room upstairs. I tried to refuse to sign that declaration, saying that if it fell in the hands of the Germans they would read it over the radio. Then he got so angry that he drew a gun at me. The girl burst into tears. I can assure you, those tears moved me. I felt more sorry for her than for myself. So I signed the declaration.»

Commissar: «What happened after that?»

Defendant: «Well, after that... I am not going to deny what followed, comrade commissar. Only two days later he called me to his house. 'We have some business, you and I', he said. 'I have here your declaration, so now you must give further proof that you

are with us. Else you will never see my daughter again and even your life may be in danger'. Then he proposed to me a plan how to deliver into the hands of the Germans the comrades of my cell and its leader. He allowed me only three days to put into effect the plan. I told him that I could not do it. 'Yes, you can, of course you can', he interrupted me. 'I am giving you three days and expect to have concrete results after that', he said and hurried off giving me no chance to reply dragging behind him his daughter, who was begging him with tears in her eyes to be less severe with me. On the evening of the third day Shtëllunga came to sleep in my house as he had done many other times before. My house is in the Lapraka quarter, not far from Safet Bey's house. We sat down to eat our supper and I began to tell Shtëllunga about my troubles, but he noticed that my sister was listening and told me to leave that conversation for later, when we would go to bed. When we finished our supper, he went to our room alone, while I went to see my uncle (he lives next door to us, only a small door separates our yards) about a pair of alpine shoes. At that moment I heard people entering the house and could not understand how they had got in, because I had made sure that the street door was locked. As I was about to go back, I heard my sister screaming, but someone must have covered her mouth with his hand. Then I heard a gun-shot followed by a spurt from an automatic and a man groaning. It was clear that Shtëllunga, surprised by the Germans, had attempted to oppose them and they had killed him. I did not have even a penknife on me, so I tried to jump over the wall, but it was too late. Two Germans and an armed Albanian civilian seized me, tied my hands and banded my eyes and dragged me I don't know where, but I was sure they were going to shoot me. Only the next day, having gone through a whole night of tortures,

I realised that I was alive and in the basements of the German Kommandature... I should like to explain one thing, comrade commissar; the trap must have been arranged by that scoundrel Backa who wanted to get rid of me, but it was bad luck for Shtëllunga.»

Commissar: «Did Shtëllunga die?»

Defendant: «Yes.»

Commissar: «How do you know?»

Defendant: «I saw him with my own eyes.»

Commissar: «You, dirty liar! You told us just now that your eyes were banded! Why don't you tell us outright that for the beautiful eyes of a strumpet you arranged the arrest and murder of your comrade? That you came to the aid of the Germans when they pointed the automatic at his head and that you wanted to finish him there and then so as to leave no trace of your treason, but you did not know that the Germans wanted him alive in order to learn from him the whole network of the Party and that they hit him with the automatic not to kill him but just to paralyse his resistance. You were blinded by your own treachery and thought that it was all over with him. But the truth found its way to the surface, as it always does. Shtëllunga, a true son of the Party, dared and survived the tortures and the bullet. He is alive and shall live, as shall live the great truth of our Party which fights against falsehood and strikes down mercilessly crime, treason and the nauseating moral of that bourgeoisie which still pretends to hold high its ragged banners with the aid of mean worms like you. But worms must go to the worms!»

\* \* \*

Zef Moisiu folded up the papers and, shaking his head musingly, murmured as if to himself: «Worms



must go to worms. The commissar has found the right word.» The silence which followed after the reading of the letter was only broken by an occasional oath of indignation.

«You say nothing, eh? You are shocked it seems.» Zef spoke again. «And you are right to be shocked. The mean act of that traitor has left us all deeply indignant. This is not the first act of its kind and it won't be the last. You must remember the danger that represented for the Party the deserting groups and elements, whelps of the bourgeoisie who had smuggled their way in to our ranks. But for this very reason we must not be discouraged by such events but must learn our lesson. What lesson can we learn from the low act of Ismail Dalipi? It is what Lenin and Stalin and the entire history of their Party teach us, that the bourgeoisie does not give up its arms without fight. On the contrary, the nearer it sees its downfall, the more aggressive, devilish means it uses to secure its safety. This incident must also make us realize our duty as communists trusted with special responsibilities: we must be conscious of the struggle, the hardships, and the sacrifices that are expected from us and must never falter in our confidence in final victory... This was all I had to say, comrades. If any of you has any question to ask or any observation to make, let him get up and speak.»

Arta rose to her feet.

«I did not understand how the trial ended, Comrade Zef, did they not shoot the dog?» she asked.

Many of the others had remained like her with unsatisfied curiosity and nodded with approval at Arta's question. Some one nodded angrily: «To me it is clear enough. They could not let a poisonous snake like him alive!» Alert kept silent. He had stuck both his elbows on the table and was staring vacantly over the heads of the others.

«Whether he was shot or not it must remain a secret, at least for the time being,» said Zef ill at ease.

He saw signs of discontent in the faces of the comrades and added: You must not bother too much about that... It should not surprise you if... »

«If the criminal returns to his mistress,» Alert interrupted him with a sarcastic laugh.

«Let us not exaggerate,» said Zef. «Why do you take it like that, Comrade Alert? It is true that the criminal may receive some benefit, though the comrades of Peza are not more merciful than we are on such matters... And I can tell you... but this must remain strictly confidential, that he has revealed the pseudonym by which he was registered as a Gestapo spy, as well as the password with which he was to countersign the information he was to give to the Gestapo, and he promised to use all this to our advantage. Do you see now? I don't think the comrades of Peza have been wrong in sparing the man's life. Whatever happens, they hold him in their hands... Is there anything else?»

The comrades looked at one another baffled, but at the same time they were relieved from the anxiety that a little while before had fallen on them like a dark shadow.

As nobody asked to speak, Zef declared the meeting closed.

One by one, leaving in long intervals between each other, the comrades departed. Only Zef, Alert and Arta remained in the room.

## CHAPTER V

### 1

All the following days, party meetings were held in a number of houses that had so far escaped the attention of the police and even in some government offices which the enemy could never suspect. The new cell, of which Arta had been appointed «responsible», held its meeting in a storehouse where empty barrels were kept (it was behind the milkshop in the Old Market.) The storehouse had its entry through the shop. The comrades came one by one, pretending to buy something and, when they made sure that nobody was watching them, they entered into the storehouse. An hour later, when all the members of the cell were in, the milkman put up the shutters, locked the door and told his neighbour, a cobbler who was also a sympathizer of the movement, that he was going to Shijak and might not be back till late that evening.

The barrel depot was a large wooden dilapidated construction, dark and ugly. On the beaten earth floor some loose planks were laid. On them stood the barrels that occupied the best part of the place. A small skylight, dusty and covered with cobwebs, allowed only a dim light to filtre through it and the people gathered inside could hardly see each other.

«This place here is not very good, Comrade Arta, couldn't you find something better?» remarked one of the comrades. «Here we can't see anything and if we are surprised there is no way of getting out.»

«Don't worry your head about that, comrade. Is that you, Deko? If it comes to that, we have a very safe exit. Can you see that door at the end of that

row of barrels? You pull the latch that is on the inside and you find yourself in the yard, then from the yard you reach easily the street of the copper-smiths. It is as easy as that. As for the light, we shall see to it in just a moment. Arta reached with her hands and caught a sort of wooden shutter which she pushed with some effort to one side, and immediately the place was flooded with bright light and fresh air. The comrades breathed relieved.

«Now that we are more comfortable, we can begin,» said Arta as she sat down on a wooden stool that stood no more than two hands above the floor. The others took their places around her, some sitting on piles of planks, others on empty barrels.

The only one who remained standing was a woman dressed in a black çarçaf, but with no veil over her face, who held a bundle of clothes in her hand. She looked anxiously around, as if searching for somebody whom she could not find, then she fixed her eyes on Arta.

«Sit down, Netka. Why don't you sit down?» said Arta gently to her, then she turned to the others who were looking at the woman with curiosity and added: «Comrade Netka was recommended to us by a party member. The cell to which she was to be proposed has been dissolved and now the District committee wants us to examine her case. I will tell you what I know of her conduct and her biography and will certainly fill the things that I don't know.»

The woman set the bundle on the ground and crouched beside it but keeping her eyes all the time fixed on Arta. The words with which Arta introduced her relieved some of the tension that was oppressing her, but now something new began to worry her; Arta had had twice referred to her by a name which was not hers and she was rightly concerned lest an error had been made somewhere on her account. She waited for

Arta to finish and, blushing violently, asked in a whisper:

«Are you sure you are not mistaken about me, comrade? My name is not what you called me... As for the Party, I am with the Party body and soul. Comrade Alert knows me.»

Arta explained that inside the Party they used pseudonyms, false names, and the pseudonym they had chosen for her had been proposed by the responsible for the District committee himself when he heard who she was.

«I also know the comrade,» said Deko smiling at Netka. «Don't you remember me? I have slept one night in your cabin, it was last March. I came together with a comrade, Piciruku, who made fun of the excessive salt you had used in the dish that night.»

«Piciruku!» the woman's face brightened. «That thin little fellow! Of course I remember!»

«Let us begin now,» proposed Arta.

She gave a summarized account of the external and internal situation, explaining more in detail the causes that had brought about the latest changes in the organization of the cells and the new tasks that had to be dealt with in the newly created circumstances. Her speech was simple and clear, so that even Netka understood everything. She was particularly moved by the report of the death of a young communist, an only son of his mother, who though fatally wounded, could think of nothing else but the message he was carrying and which should by no means be allowed to fall into the hands of the Germans. Then she felt bitter against the man who had betrayed a comrade and organized his murder by the Germans. At first the story seemed unbelievable to her, but when she heard that behind the traitor stood an important personage and heard his name, she raised both her hands to her head and exclaimed:

«Safet Bey Backa! Is that scoundrel still alive?»

\*  
\*   \*  
\*

Arta continued to speak in her calm even voice, while Netka's mind wandered back in the past, when Mr. Backa, who she thought was from Fier, used to come almost every Sunday on his blue dog-cart to visit Galip Bey Frakulla and, together with the other guests, passed the night eating and drinking or playing cards. She could clearly remember his milky white face, the thin moustache and the smooth black hair which he used to comb sideways. He must have been well over forty at that time. But he was clearly a depraved person, as one could easily judge from his words and deeds. When Netka, then a very young girl, served them the drinks, Mr. Backa would gaze at her with his lewd eyes and without a trace of shame, would say to Galip Bey: «Now, Galip Bey, you have here a real fine piece; where the devil did you pick her up?» And, while Galip Bey was not looking, he would put his hand as if by accident on her knee. The girl would blush and would not know what to do, while Galip Bey looked displeased at his guest's manners and stood silent. Then Mr. Backa would turn the whole thing into a joke and say: «Why do you worry, my dear, we keep these things between us; there is no fear that Firduze hanëm will hear or see us».

2

«This is the situation, comrades,» concluded Arta. «Very unfavourable for our work. But we shall get

over the difficulties, we have the people with us, the people who have trusted their lives and their fate to the Party which protects them and defends them in all circumstances regardless of the sacrifices. On the other hand, as you must have read in the last Party tract which exposes the deals the Ballists and the Social democrats make with the Germans, the day when the noose will tighten around the neck of the Germans, is getting ever nearer. The day of the liberation of the people is coming!» Arta very often used phrases like those of the other members of the District committee whom she envied for their fine way of speaking. «Our duty, comrades, is to remain loyal fighters for the freedom and welfare of the people, as it becomes true communists, to the end of our lives,» she ended.

When the discussions were well under way, Netka noticed that even the fellows who were poorly dressed spoke clearly and fluently; one of them, who had large patches on the knees of his trousers and wore boots much too big for his feet that weighed at least four kilos, spoke even better than the girl Arta. «And what must I do?» the woman began to ask herself. «That girl told the comrades that I also am expected to speak. What can I say to them? I will surely stutter, drown myself in perspiration, and say nothing sensible. I am not sure I did well to get myself mixed in this affair...»

Deko, who was the last to speak, mentioned the proposal that Netka should be accepted as a party member. «Our cell,» he said, «considers it an honour to admit to its ranks a woman from the working class, a woman who has suffered much and who is courageously giving her help to our struggle. I have known her myself. Of her own free will she has put her home at our disposal as a base for illegal comrades. Then... to cut it short, isn't our Party first and foremost a party of the workers?»

Arta nodded approvingly and, after waiting for Deko to finish, she began herself to speak:

«Comrade Deko is quite right. But the proposal must be put before the meeting for discussion. And since it seems we have finished with the first item, I think that the new comrade should say to us a few words about her past and present life, then we can discuss the proposal.»

The woman lowered her eyes and began to play nervously with a button on the front of her *çarçaf*, and though feeling she had so many things to tell them, she could not say a single word.

«You can take off your *çarçaf* if you want to. Perhaps it is too hot here,» said Arta as she reached to help her.

Netka raised her head, and she flushed scarlet as she stopped Arta's hand with a decisive «No, no!»

Arta thought it better to change the subject.

«Well, Netka, can't you tell us something about yourself? Maybe you do not feel at your ease since it is the first time. It is very natural and we have all passed through this experience. But little by little we have got over it and now, as you see, we can talk like lawyers. Did you suppose we came to the party learned? No, Netka. The most learned here are Deko and I, and do you know how much schooling we have had? I, who am the older, have finished two classes of the secondary school. Deko has five elementary grades. Bimi there, who speaks so nicely,» she pointed at the boy with the big shoes, «has never been to school, but has had enough will and perseverance to learn to read and write... You must above all keep one thing in mind, that we are here at a party meeting where no discrimination is made between learned and not learned, between big and small, that we are all comrades and share the same rights.»

Arta's words seemed to have lifted some of the woman's uneasiness. She began to see the comrades under a different light. She nodded with her head and



smiled, implying that she understood what was said to her and it made her happy, but that she found it too difficult to speak.

«Tell us, what has made you be so close to the Party?» asked Arta unexpectedly. «A little while ago you said that you were body and soul with the Party, why?»

The woman's expression changed. Two deep lines appeared on her clean forehead which, together with the finely arched black eyebrows and the melancholy look of her eyes increased Arta's curiosity.

«With the Party?» the woman raised her shoulder; as if surprised at Arta's question. «I think it must have been my sufferings that have made me want to be as near the Party as possible, what else?... My sufferings and... perhaps my need for support... You know how one feels when one is alone... when you need support and everybody drives you off throwing stones at you, and you don't know which way to go... I don't know... Perhaps I am wrong.»

«No sister, on the contrary, you are quite right,» said Arta.

The woman looked around at the others. The eyes of all of them were fixed at her and seemed to be prompting her to continue.

And she continued:

«I have had nobody in my life since a child, no mother, no father. I grew up to the age of eighteen as a servant at a bey's house. I have suffered much there, he was right, the comrade who spoke before. Everybody in that house raised his hand to strike me; the bey, and his wife, and his guests... and there was also that Safet Bey Backa who had nothing else to do but run after women. Then there was the old lady, Galip Bey's mother. She was a real dragon. I had to endure everything because I could do nothing else, I had nobody to rely upon. At last things came to a point when I could not stand it any longer and I ran away...

I ran where my eyes led me... But it cost me dear. For the last fifteen years my husband and I have been out on the road and haven't been able to settle down anywhere for fear of the bey, who had got so mad when he heard that Ferik had also ran away together with me...»

«Who is Ferik?» asked the boy with the big shoes interrupting her.

«My husband. He also was a servant of the bey. When he saw in what dangerous situation I was, he took pity on me, put his hand on my shoulder and said: «Come, we will run away together, come what may. The worst that can happen is death; we owe it and we have to pay it sooner or later.» That very day we married and ran away.

The comrades were looking at each other strangely moved by the simple story; Arta was trying to write down everything the woman had said. When she had finished Arta pushed aside with her pencil the lock of hair that had fallen over her eyes and turned to the others:

«So, comrades, what do you say?»

«We have nothing to say. We all agree that the comrade should be admitted to the Party as a candidate member,» said Deko with authority as if speaking on behalf of all the others.

«Then let us put it to the vote,» proposed Arta. «Who is in favour?»

They all prepared to raise their hands, but the young man with the big shoes got slowly to his feet and said:

«Wait a minute, comrades. I may also be in favour, but first let the comrade tell us something more about her husband. We only heard that his name is Ferik... Ferik What?... What is he doing now and what is his attitude towards the National-Liberation War? This is the least we ought to know about him.»

Netka did not ask permission to speak. She straightened her body with a certain pride, which also radiated from her eyes as she looked straight at the boy and replied:

«Ferik Talo is his name. For some time he has been a worker here in Tirana, now he is a partisan.»

«Is that true? Are you sure?» asked the young fellow doubtfully.

«Yes, I am sure!»

The fellow was still unconvinced. He shrugged his shoulders saying:

«I don't know what to make of it. I have known once a certain Ferik Talo who worked with me at the brick factory, but he turned out to be very bad...»

«No, he did not,» said Netka indignantly. But then she thought that the news she had received recently about Ferik could be wrong. Or maybe something new had happened... «May God not allow such a thing», she thought. Then there was her son Filo who was so excited over his father that he could not sleep; what could she tell him if something had gone wrong.

«I have my reasons to want this question clarified,» said the young man with more assurance. «And I think that Comrade Arta could tell us something about her husband Ferik.»

Arta set her notebook on her lap and turned to the young man:

«Is it about that affair with the Ballists at Lushnja you are talking?»

«Yes.»

«Drop it. It was all a big lie. For the last two months Ferik Talo has been a fighter in the ranks of the National Liberation Army and is considered to be a very good partisan. The Party knows all about him. Is there anybody else who would like to speak?»

She looked at each of them, particularly at Bimi who was getting red in the face and at Netka who

kept eyes lowered and had resumed playing with the button on her çarçaf.

«Well, if there is nothing else, let us put it to the vote.»

They all raised their hands looking at the woman with a peculiar expression of kindness.

## CHAPTER I

### PART FIVE

After twenty-four hours of steady attempts to reach the guard who appeared when he did not see him there. With the assistance of the guard at last, a passing incident, the way cleared by the German. The last fired two or three times at him, but it was dark and darkness to a degree in the night, so he was not able to see. He got apprehensive of danger when hearing the shot where of a bullet and the last a sharp bang. In his thought, but passing, and the guard seemed to have happened as far as

He had had a chance, which, from the first guard when he was into a second one whose appearance, which, placed his own. This time he used a rifle, which had been then much helped himself of a light spot. He dropped on the ground, and the guard seemed to be in the air, and the guard seemed to



## CHAPTER I

### 1

After twenty four hours of stealthy attempts to avoid the guards who appeared where he did not expect them, Veli the messenger succeeded at last in leaving behind the area controlled by the Germans. They had fired two or three times at him, but it was dark and darkness is a blessing to the outlaw, as he often used to say. He got apprehensive of danger only when hearing the short whine of a bullet and feeling a sharp burn in his thigh, but nothing really serious seemed to have happened so far.

He had had a narrow escape from shots of the first guard when he ran into a second one whose unexpected «Halt!» pierced his ears. This time he used a tactic which had more than once helped him out of a tight spot. He dropped on the ground and rolled over several times to get off the place where he

had been noticed. Then he jumped to his feet, took off his opingas and ran zigzagging in the woods. The guards continued to fire even when he was out of their reach, but the shooting aroused the interest of other guards stationed at the «Shkumbini» barracks by which the messenger had meant to pass.

Shots came now from that direction, where they had either seen him or were firing at random, but he continued to advance winding his way among the trees, crawling on hands and knees or darting away like a quick shadow. He reached an open space where a field spread before him. It was a large corn-field on which the maize had grown quite high; beyond it was another thicket which led to the top of the hill. The shortest way to get to that thicket was to pass straight across the field, but it seemed too dangerous and for a moment Veli hesitated. Suddenly from behind and to his right came a large beam of light splashing upon the hillside and flooding the whole area from the barracks to the top of the hill. The Germans were using searchlights to illuminate the place and it would soon be the turn of the corn field. Though still too tired and needing a moment of rest, Veli crouched and begun to crawl rapidly across the field. The light of the reflector caught him while he was still some distance from the thicket; the Germans had spotted him and concentrated their fire on him, so he was obliged to change his direction every three or four paces. He could not tell how long that went on.

Several times it came to his mind to destroy the letter Zef had given to him for the commissar Toja, fearing he could get killed and the letter might fall in the hands of the Germans, but the thought that he might survive and would have to appear before the commissar without the letter he had been entrusted with made him desist. Such a disgrace had never happened to him during his entire service as a messenger.



By dawn he had left the Sauk hills behind, and now he could distinguish through the small coppice before him the brown houses of the village scattered here and there at the fringe of the olive grove, encircled by their low fences and flanked by cattle-sheds and granaries. The messenger could also hear the voices of the villagers taking their cattle out and calling to each other their morning greetings.

Strange! How dear those voices sounded to him and how pleasant the silence of the village where everybody freely went his own way whereas on the other side of the hill he had just left behind the people languished like ants in a big vessel of hot water!. He sat down on the ground, wiped the sweat dripping from his face and lighted a cigarette; only now he realised how tired he was. But the thought that he had had a narrow escape from a serious peril and that he was soon going to join his comrades at Peza, having successfully accomplished a difficult task, gave him new forces. A feeling of intense happiness came over him reminding him of the simple joys of his childhood. Not that they had an easy life in the village where he was born, but the memories of that time were sweet... How fine it would be to win freedom as soon as possible and to give to the poor the rights for which Veli also, like thousands of other young peasants was fighting, the right to own a modest cabin and an acre of land and till it for oneself.

Veli was convinced that after the war important changes would come about but this was the first time he had thought for so long about the future. For two full years he had been in the ranks of the partisans, at first as a simple partisan in the «Old Detachment», later with various duties. In August 1943 he had been sent to take a wounded partisan to the hospital of

Tirana, but then, instead of sending him back to his comrades, they had retained him a week in Tirana and had sent him after that to the Peza Group and then to the Third Brigade which had just been formed. Now he was a messenger, an apparently simple duty but in reality extremely delicate, risky and important. The work he was doing was highly appreciated by the comrades of the District committee. And he was most suited for it since he had long worked in Tirana as assistant driver and as errand boy at the construction enterprise of Venancetti and was fully familiar with the streets and quarters of the capital.

«The day which we are fighting for will surely come and pretty soon,» Veli murmured to himself as he threw away the end of the cigarette, then his thoughts went to his mother. It was long since he had last heard from her. Six months, or maybe a year, he was not sure. The winter operations had so entangled the situation that one did not know where to inquire about one's relatives or friends. Besides, there were many people about whom one would like to ask... There were his own family, then the comrades of the «Old Detachment» and the Third Brigade, and many others, and who could tell where the waves of the operations had blown them off to? Veli imagined the operations as wild storms of terrifying winds and rains that uprooted centenarian oaks and rolled huge rocks and swept over everything on their way: houses, people, cattle... everything.

«And who would tell you anything about a poor old woman like your mother, my dear old Veli?» said the messenger to himself.

But deep in his heart he felt an emptiness which made him promptly think: «What is then the purpose of all this upheaval?» But he pulled himself immediately together, looked angrily to one side as if somebody standing there had put that bad thought in his head and, turning to that imaginary somebody, shouted at

him with irritation? «Will you get away and leave me alone, you? This upheaval, as you say, is for the never-dying people, for our people and for the coming generations». Then, still agitated, he got to his feet and was about to proceed towards the village, when he felt a strange shiver in his body, his shirt sticking on his skin and his feet so heavy that he could not raise them off the ground. He even thought that his right foot had been caught in some shrub, but when he turned to see what it was, he noticed that the grass on which he had been sitting was red with blood. He realised that he must have been wounded, but he could not understand why he did not feel any pain. He began to feel with his hands to find where the wound was, his head, his chest his shoulders, and when reaching his right leg, his hand stuck in the clotted blood that had gathered there. It was strange. He had lost so much blood and had felt no pain. He looked at his hands and saw that they were extremely pale; he rolled up the legs of his trousers and saw that his legs too were deathly pale. He tried once more to walk but stumbled and fell flat on his face. Only then he felt a piercing pain through his leg and had to tighten his jaws to prevent a groan, when he opened his eyes he saw that the village, the olive trees, the hills and the white clouds were turning around him.

«It's impossible!» he whispered and was so convinced of having nothing serious that he made another attempt to get up and walk. He succeeded in raising himself to his feet but his pain increased, his head felt dizzy and his body heavy; only after an enormous effort and holding on to the shrubs he could take two-three steps. Seeing that he was not able to walk, he leaned against the trunk of a tree by the side of the path and looked around for somebody who could come to his aid. He saw a peasant walking along the side of a freshly ploughed field carrying a wooden plough on his shoulder. Veli decided to call him whatever

might he happen to be. «Even if he is an enemy, the fact that he lives in the free zone shows that he won't dare do anything bad. The really bad ones have long ago abandoned the free zones». This Veli knew quite well. So he filled his lungs and tried to shout «Hey, comrade», the call that he liked very much but to his surprise his voice was so weakened that he could hardly hear it himself. He tried once more but again his voice got strangled in his throat.

«I must have got it pretty badly,» he began to suspect at last, but the thought that he could die did not cross his mind. Death could not come to him just like that, unnoticed. He had seen his comrades fall shouting «Forward, partisans!» and that was the only way he could see himself die, fearlessly, standing upright, shouting... This was one of the reasons why at first he had not been pleased when they proposed him to become a messenger. But the commissar had explained how important it was and Veli at last had accepted.

«And now?» he asked himself wondering what he should do. «Well, now come what may, I'll have to do it my own way,» and drawing his gun out he fired several times in the air.

The peasant with the plough held his pace and turned around to see who was firing. At first he could not see anything and wanted to continue on his way, but then changed his mind, dropped the plough on the ground and began to climb up the hill. Yonder in the village, a woman who was shaking a blanket in front of her house also stopped and looked toward the thicket.

«Higher up, Nuzi, by the broken olive tree,» she cried to the peasant who was going up the hill looking right and left.

Jonuz Bathore (for short Nuzi) was in no time by Veli's side. The messenger, holding himself with dif-

ficulty on his feet, looked at the peasant and smiled at him apologetically.

From the sunken eyes and the pale face of the stranger the peasant could see that the condition of the messenger was serious but he did not show it.

«What is the matter with you, man? What have you done?» he asked under the impression that the wounded man standing before him had been attempting to kill himself for some reason. «But don't worry, I can see it in your eyes that you have nothing serious.»

The messenger nodded with his head and murmured with his feeble voice:

«Thank you.» And beckoning to the peasant to come nearer he continued. «It is not about myself that I am worried, comrade do you understand? I have another preoccupation, much more important. I must reach Peza as soon as possible, dead or alive. That is what I will ask you to do for me.»

«To Peza? Why not?» the peasant said to comfort him. «I will take you to Peza soon enough, but first I must take you to the village.»

He straightened the wounded man as well as he could, bent himself a little forward, then lifted him on his back the way porters carry heavy burdens and walked towards the village.

### 3

The house of Jonuz Bathore was not of the best ones in the village. It consisted of only two rooms, the one on the ground floor serving as a stable for the cattle and the other, on the first floor, being the living room. The stable had a separate door that opened on the courtyard, while a steep staircase outside almost a ladder, led to the upper room.

Veli, the messenger woke up in the evening when the sun was slowly sinking towards the horizon and its reddish rays entered through the narrow window and filled the room with a hazy pinkish light. Through that light, as in a tormented dream, he could distinguish the crooked beams that supported the house, the garlands of onions hanging from the ceiling, the dishes and pans arranged on a cupboard and the closet where the sleeping things were kept at the far end of the room. From outside came vague noises of people and animals. A hen jumped cackling on the window sill and from there on the cupboard.

With a little effort Veli began to recall the events of the night, his narrow escape from the Germans, the way he reached the free zone, the peasant who had carried him on his shoulders and, less clearly, the first treatment he had received... Yes, the treatment... He felt with his hand the place of his wound. It was bandaged up and fixed so that he could not move his leg. Then he remembered how they had burned his wound and applied some tobacco and a little raki on it, which had made him cry out like a child.

The second thing that came to his mind was the peasant's vest he had been wearing. They must have taken it off, but where had they put it? He looked for it under the pillow, on the wall, on the line near the window where his trousers were hanging, but could not see it.

He groaned once or twice, not because of the pain but to call the attention of the owners of the house. He saw that his voice had returned. He groaned once more, a little louder this time, but still no one showed up. Then he stretched his hand to the fireplace, caught the tongs and began to bang them on the floor. From the yard came Jonuz's voice calling «coming, coming» and his hurried steps were heard up the stairs.

«You feel better now, don't you?» he greeted the wounded young man, glad to see the change in his face.

«Now you are out of danger but this morning you were pretty bad. I was telling you that you were all right, but what else could I say? Eh, Veli, Veli!»

The messenger was surprised to hear the peasant call him by his name. It was a pseudonym known to few people. Had he spoken in his sleep or had something else happened? He turned to Jonuz and asked him directly:

«Who told you my name, uncle?»

Jonuz smiled.

«Who, can't you find out for yourself?»

Veli tried to but it was no use.

«Eh, Veli, Veli,» murmured Jonuz Bathore. «You were born on a lucky day. To think that you were nearly dead when we brought you here. Our village has never seen a doctor or nurse. Never! But for you they found one just when you most needed him, just as if we had called them by telephone!... The affairs of that Party of yours must be going really well, I can assure you...»

Astonished by what he heard the messenger raised himself on his elbow and asked:

«Tell me first where is that vest I was wearing, then I will tell you the rest, if I can.»

«Why? Do you feel cold?» asked Jonuz and reached to arrange the blanket that had slipped to one side.

«No, man?! On the contrary, I feel hot, but I want my vest.»

«Your vest? I don't know. Someone of the comrades that were here today might have taken it... But you mustn't worry about that, I will find you a better one, twenty of them if you want.»

Veli pushed aside the blanket and rose in a sitting position.

«Are you speaking in earnest or are you joking?»

«I tell you, I will find you twenty vests like the one you have lost.»

«Look here, I don't want twenty vests, I want the one I was wearing, do you understand?» Veli was so irritated that he wanted to get out of the bed.

«Don't, don't! What are you trying to do? The doctor said you must not move the fingers of your hands, let alone get out of bed,» said the peasant pleadingly.

«I don't care what the doctor said! I don't give a damn if it is dangerous to me. All I want is my vest.»

The red patches on his face and the angry flash of his eyes convinced the peasant that the messenger could not be so distressed by the simple loss of his vest but that there must be something much more important in it.

«Wait a minute, brother,» he said in an attempt to placate the wounded young man. «Let me ask my wife and my daughter, maybe they know something about it.»

He opened the window and shouted:

«Hajrije, Hajrije!»

From the courtyard came the voice of the girl rising above the usual noises. The father called again:

«Come up here, will you?»

A moment later a girl about sixteen years old appeared at the door. She was wearing an old skirt that reached to her ankles and a pair of rubber opingas also too big for her. Over the skirt she had a green waist-coat embroidered with dark blue thread on the seams. She stood in the middle of the room pushing back the locks that kept falling over her forehead, looking at the young man with a half astonished, half humorous smile, happy to see that he had changed so much since she had seen him in the morning and that the colour of his face was quite normal as she saw him sitting on the bed.

«Did he get well so quickly?» she asked as the smile sparkled in her eyes.

«Yes,» he did. «But there is something else that worries him now. Do you know anything?»



The girl was taken aback by her father's serious tone. Her eyebrows gathered in a frown and the smile faded gradually from her eyes as she prepared to hear bad news.

«Do you know what happened to this comrade's vest?»

«It was an old vest,» said Veli to make it easier for her.

The girl looked up and the smile returned in her eyes.

«His vest? Yes, I saw it.»

«When was that? Where?»

«Today, when that lady took it.»

«A lady? My vest? What are you talking about, my girl? What lady took it?» asked Veli impatiently.

«It was a lady who came here with the others and wanted to take me with her to the partisans.»

Jonuz Bathore sat down beside the messenger, passed his arm over his shoulders and tried to reassure him:

«Listen Veli. You have no idea what has been going on here today. Let me tell you first all from the beginning, then we can think together and do what is most reasonable.»

«Go on, then, talk! May the devil take it!» said the messenger pressing his temples with both hands.

«Father Myslym was here himself, you see? I think he was on his way to the South. He had five civilians with him. The one that bandaged your wound was a doctor. Last night he had slept at Shaban's, who is chairman of our council. He should have left early this morning but he heard about you and came to see if he could be of any help. I was so surprised to see Father Myslim coming here! He recognized you and spoke to you kindly: 'Come now, Veli, be a brave boy. What happened to you? Speak to me, say something to your Father, Veli!' He is such a fine man. Everybody knows

what a hero he is. And yet, he could not hold back his tears when he saw you. Then he talked with the doctor and recommended you particularly to him. The doctor. . . I did not like his face, but I must admit that he looked very skilful as he worked on you. Then there was that lady about whom my girl got so excited; she was a nurse but she was even better than the doctor. She stood by your side all the time making injections, giving you medicines and helping the doctor to dress your wound. . .

«Strange!» murmured Veli as if to himself.

«Strange indeed,» continued Jonuz. «That lady seemed to know you very well. She told Father Myslim that she had met you two days ago in Tirana and could not understand how was it possible to find you here and not at Peza.

«Did she really say so?» remarked the messenger with surprise, looking at the girl who was trying to light a lamp that was hanging on the wall. «Did you happen to hear what her name was?»

Jonuz shrugged his shoulders.

«The others called her Gjena,» said the girl enthusiastically. «She was such a nice woman! 'Won't you come with me, Hajrije, and become a partisan?' she said. But father. . .»

She stopped short and lowered her eyes. In the light of the lamp Veli saw more clearly the oval of her face, her light fair hair and her dark eyes, her finely designed dark eyebrows arching high over her eyes.

«Did she say so? It seems unbelievable!» whispered Veli, his eyes still fixed on the girl.

«I swear by my daddy, that is what she said,» cried Hajrije so ingenuously that the messenger smiled for the first time that day.

«All right, all right, I believe you. But what did she do with my vest?» the messenger asked, the preoccupation returning to his face.

The girl glanced quickly at her father.

«How should I know?» she shrugged. «Perhaps, as she had nothing but a thin dress on her and to walk so far... She was going to Peza with the others,» the girl added.

«To Peza? Then it isn't as bad as I feared,» murmured the messenger. «The trouble is... Do you know what I want now?» he returned to Jonuz getting hold of his arm. «A horse and somebody to come with me to Peza. Can you arrange it? You promised me this morning in the thicket to help me.»

«Now. In the night?» cried Jonuz and Hajrije at the same time.

«This very moment! I must arrive there dead or alive! Do you understand?»

Jonuz Bathora stood still for a moment, his forehead creased, his eyes thoughtful, biting his lips as if he wanted to say something but did not know how to begin.

«Won't it do to send someone else?» he asked.

«No. It won't do,» replied the messenger curtly.

The girl remained standing with her hands locked together, her head bent over her left shoulders, and looking at the messenger with pity.

«I can't take on myself such a great responsibility, Veli, I shall have to talk first to the chairman of our council,» said Jonuz.

Without waiting for another word from her father, Hajrije ran out, exchanged a few words with her mother who was just returning from the field, then ran up the street that led to the other end of the village.

## CHAPTER II

### 1

Huddled behind hedges and among olive trees, the small house of the chairman of the village council hummed with human voices. Several horses were tied on branches in the courtyard. The chairman, a shortish man about forty years old, wearing an old soldier's jacket buttoned up to the chin and a high white fez that made his face look smaller, was discussing animatedly with two other men who were trying between them to convince him about something. One of them was wearing a worn out civilian suit and an ordinary worker's cap, the other was dressed like a peasant but wore a partisan's visorless cap.

Hajrije stopped at the hedge of the courtyard and listened.

«It is an order of the Party, comrade chairman; the Party understands these matters better than you and I do; it is of no use to argue,» was saying the young man in civilian clothes.

The chairman was shaking his head unconvinced:

«That might be as you say, but what am I to do?... Do you expect me to evacuate the village in only two hours? The old people, the children who cannot walk, what are we to do with them. Then the livestock, the household things, shall we throw them away into the Erzen River? It is hard, brother, it is very hard for us.

Of course, it is hard but it must be done, continued the other. It is a matter of saving the lives of so many people and we have no time to bother about

livestock and household property, do you understand me? you know the Germans...

The girl felt a chill run down her spine. «My god!» she murmured, thinking of the wounded young man. «What if they catch him alive?» She wanted to run back and tell him and her father what she had just heard and at the same time to warn the wounded young man to hide himself somewhere in the woods. But again she changed her mind. No, no! It was not a matter she and her father could decide themselves, it concerned the chairman of the council and the man who was talking to him in the name of the party. It was a pity that that comrade who looked after the people of the whole village did not speak anything about the wounded messenger; «perhaps he hasn't been told about him», she justified him in her mind and, without hesitating any longer, she jumped over the hedge and ran to the chairman.

«And you, what do you want here?» he asked astonished. «Ah, yes, I got it,» he said slapping his forehead and turned to the two men. «Do you know? We have a wounded partisan at Nuzi Bathore's.

«A partisan? Wounded? At Jonuz's?» cried the young man with the worker's cap. «What is his name?

The chairman came closer to the man and whispered something in his ear, but the man did not seem to understand him and pursed his mouth.

«They call him Veli,» cried the girl. «And he is very worried about something and wants to start immediately for Peza..., and father is worried, too, and doesn't know what to do.

«Veli wounded?» said the young man surprised and turned to the chairman. «When did it happen? Why didn't you tell us? Eh, chairman, chairman!»

A mortar shell exploded at that moment and interrupted him. It came with an ugly whine, flew high

over their heads and fell on the hillside rather away from the village.

The girl screamed and covered her head with her hands, the horses stirred nervously, the dogs began to bark angrily all over the village. A small group of people came out from the chairman's house. In a minute the courtyards and the streets were filled with men shouting, women screaming and children crying.

«Look, now, what you have done,» said the young man to the chairman. Then, patting the girl on the shoulder, he turned to his comrade:

«You, Ismail, take the best horse here and go with this girl. Together with Jonuz and his family you will take Veli to Peza. Keep off the road until you cross the river.»

He had not finished his phrase, when a second shell came. It howled lower above their heads and fell much closer than the first one.

Up the narrow path that winded through the thicket on the other side of the hill men and women were already running, carrying children or bundles of household things, or leading a goat or a cow. Some climbed up the gullies dug by the torrents, others took shelter behind the bigger trunks of the trees.

The chairman of the village council was at a loss what to do, but he soon pulled himself together, walked to the men who had just come out of his house, gave some instructions to some of them, and told the others to disperse in different directions. Only the chairman, the young man with the worker's cap and an old man remained in the yard; the old man, a cigarette in his mouth, was removing some boxes and bales from the house and arranging them in the yard. When he had done that, and still keeping the cigarette in the corner of his mouth, he began to load the horses.

A young man came running from the house to give him a hand.

«Rexha, my boy, I can do it myself. Run along now,» the old man said.

A third shell fell in the middle of the village. New screams and shouts followed. «Take away the children!» people were crying. The chairman ran to the corner of the street, cupped his hands round the mouth and began to shout: «Keep along the valley, comrades, along the valley!» Then he ran to see how much damage had the third shell caused.

«The typewriter, uncle Jazi, did you put it on a horse?» asked Rexha.

The old man slapped his forehead.

«I almost forget it! But don't bother, I will take it on my shoulders. Don't stay here any longer, run along.»

## 2

The group accompanying the wounded messenger disappeared in the woods at the foot of the hill. Hajrija, who was carrying a small bundle of clothes, was leading the horse by the collar rope. Her mother was carrying a heavier bale, following behind the horse, while Jonuz Bathore and Ismail, the young man with the partisan's cap and peasant's clothes who had not yet pronounced a word, were performing the hard task of walking alongside the horse, the one on the right, the other on the left side, holding the wounded Veli by the arms. Veli was doing his best not to show the pain that the jolts of the horse were causing him, but he could not restrain the almost inaudible groans that from time to time escaped him.

Hajrija suffered together with the messenger. Every now and then she would turn around and ask him: «Shall we stop a while and rest?» The messenger would

smile to her gratefully but would not consent. «No, Hajrija, no. It won't do. We can't afford to lose a minute. We are partisans now and partisans never rest before performing their task.»

These words sounded particularly sweet to Hajrija. She wondered whether Veli counted her also among his partisan comrades. Partisan! What a beautiful name! It waked both happy and sad memories of the past...» Partisans never rest before performing their task,» she repeated to herself.

And so it was, indeed. Hajrija recalled that cold winter night at her home, some two or three months ago, and once more her heart went to the people she had met that night.

....The winter had been very cold... A mad wind lifted swift white clouds from the snow that covered the mountains and the plains, the trees and the courtyards. It whined and howled and filled the air with loud complaints, but from the fireplace came the pleasant crackling of the burning logs... Deep in his thoughts, his bushy eyebrows low over his eyes, her father was sitting by the fire. Beside him his wife sat mending. Hajrija was watching the flames thinking of the lambs huddled close to their mothers down in the cellar. «Aren't the lambs cold?» asked Hajrija, but her father did not hear her. He hardly heard the muffled barking of the dogs and a little later a light knock at the door which only a very keen ear could catch in that stormy night.

«Did you hear anything, Hajrija?» he asked absently.

«No, father.»

«It sounded like someone knocking.»

«Did it?» The girl took the oil lamp and went to the door. Her mother left aside her mending and followed her... This time the knocking came clearer... It was as if someone was apologizing for disturbing them at that time of the night.



«Who is it?»

«Open, please. We are friends.

«Friends?» Jonuz Bathore became suspicious. Friends never come so almost stealthily; they call out your name while still a way off. But whoever it was, it did not do to leave them waiting out in the cold. He opened the door and a blast of wind and snowflakes filled the room. Hajrija had to cover the lamp with her hand to keep it from going out. The first to come in was a shortish man almost lost in the big army coat that was white with snow. Then came a lanky young man, bare-headed, dishellved; he was holding in one hand an automatic, in the other his cap which he had just taken off while the first man was taking off his heavy boots. The younger one addressed the owner of the house:

«We will disturb you tonight, Nuz Bathore; we cannot help it.»

«Look who it is!» cried Jonuz astonished and grabbed the young man in his arms. «Men like you are never a disturbance to Jonuz Bathore, Kajo Karafili.»

Hajrija, who had often heard that name, set the lamp on a stool, raised her hands to her cheeks and stood staring at the newcomer:

«We are bringing some more friends with us,» said Kajo apologetically. «We need no food or clothing, just a roof over our heads...»

«You ought to be ashamed of yourself to talk to me like that,» said Jonuz offended. «Where are the others?»

Three more men came in one after the other. The first one had covered his head and shoulders with a sack in the guise of a hood, he had no coat and was wearing a khaki vest buttoned up to his chin. His foot-gear was also in a lamentable state: the soles were so far gone that his feet were showing. Hajrija felt terribly sorry for that partisan but she was struck even more by the appearance of the hair flowing from under

the cap and reaching the shoulders which showed clearly that it was a girl; Hajrija was so impressed that she forgot all about the others.

«A girl partisan?!» she cried and rushed to help her take off her coat which was heavy with snow.

The girl partisan smiled, stroked Hajrija's face with her ice cold hand, bent her head towards the girl and whispered: «Wait a moment. I can't take off my coat as yet. It may be my turn to keep guard outside.»

«Oh! to keep guard in the cold!» thought Hajrija with a shudder. But another partisan volunteered for the duty. The girl partisan came by the fire and sat down to warm herself. Immediately Hajrija sat down beside her. How nice, how pretty she was when she looked up and smiled to Kajo. Her name was Myrvete. That night Hajrija did not let Myrvete out of her sight, they even slept in the same bed and became close friends. They had promised each other to meet again, very soon, and Hajrija had been looking forward to their next meeting.... But soon after that she had learned that both Kajo and Myrvete had been killed....

A nervous shout from her father brought her back to reality.

«Hajrija, can't you see the road or are you sleeping?» The girl shivered as if awakened by the cold, opened wide her eyes and exclaimed:

«My godness! My eyes had closed all by themselves!»

«You should be more careful, comrade partisan,» Veli rebuked her playfully.

3

Still some way from the little valley, having reached a clearing where the grass grew thick and the

wild flowers filled the air with a sweet fragrance, order was given for a short halt and they all settled in small groups. The children lay like lambs in the grass falling asleep without their supper as they watched the flames of the small fire in the middle of the clearing. The babies in their cradles woke up and began to cry. The elderly haltered the horses letting them graze the lush grass, then sat down cross-legged around the fire talking and lighting one cigarette after another.

«How can one tell? But it may well be a real one.»

«No, man, no! That Rexha fellow said it was a small affair and would not take more than two or three days.»

«So be it, brother. If it goes on much longer we are finished. I had no time to gather my sheep.»

«Your sheep! And what about our houses, the things in them... Now the first thing is to save ourselves... As for the livestock and the household belongings, they are done with, that is what I say.»

Uncle Jazi was listening absently, thinking about his own affairs, but his attention was attracted elsewhere. He had noticed a group of young people who had not been with them when they started from the village. They were sitting apart from the others, almost by the side of the road. Their clothes too, though it was hard to distinguish them in the darkness, seemed different from those of the others. And they seemed all dressed alike. At first he watched them without much attention, but then one of the voices sounded familiar to him and he came closer to see who it was.

«Aren't you Bim, by any chance?» he asked as if casually the young man who talking at that moment.

«What Bim, old man? Your sight must be pretty bad.»

«My sight may be bad, my boy, because I am old, as you say, but I am sure I know your voice.»

«All right, then, who am I?»

Uncle Jazi stopped to think. He had no doubt that

he knew that voice but he could not identify it. It sounded to him like the voice of someone he had known and liked, of someone with whom he had often talked ... Who could it be?

«Come on, old man, tell us who I am,» the young man teased him. «I have been told that the Kosova people never grow old.»

«Piciruku! By god, it is him!» cried the old man and stretched his arms to embrace him.

At that moment from beyond the hill came the hum of distant motors which increased rapidly and reached its peak, when in the dark sky appeared the red and green lights of a fighter-plane flying towards the sea.

The people in the clearing stopped talking and raised their heads to watch the plane. Only Uncle Jazi trying to find his way among the sitting figures, and to reach his friend Piciruku, was paying no attention to the plane.

The plane soon disappeared behind the hills and the people took a deep breath of relief, but a minute later it returned flying lower than the first time.

«To the woods, comrades, quick!» shouted Piciruku, his metallic voice carrying a distinct note of authority.

There followed a general scramble towards the woods. Uncle Jazi was at a loss what to do and stopped to see what was happening around him. Women were running about screaming, some dragging their children to the woods, others unable to find their children, others still pulling an unwilling cow or goat to safety.

The plane was approaching like a black shadow against the dark sky. A round white object detached itself from the plane, burst into flames, took the form of a fiery umbrella, and turned the darkness into daylight.

«To the wood, comrades, drop everything and run!» came again Piciruku's commanding voice.

Uncle Jazi rushed towards a group of people that

had remained behind, grabbed in his arms two children that had been left alone and ran with them under the trees.

«Quick! Quick!» came calls from every side, but suddenly they were drowned by the deafening machine-gun fire coming from the plane. The dark brown monster passed like a cloud, discharging its thunder and lightening over the heads of the fugitives.

In the silence that followed were heard the steps of Piciruku and some of his comrades, who went around to see what had happened. «Are you all right?» they asked. «And you? Nobody hurt? That is fine!...»

Men, women and children looked stunned like people who, having lost their senses for some time, suddenly wake up unable to understand what has happened to them. They could neither talk nor breathe properly. They were staring vacantly at each other and their cold, troubled eyes seemed devoid of thoughts.

Only Uncle Jazi had guarded his usual calm. When hearing Piciruku's voice he realized that his friend has assumed the responsibility required by the particular circumstances and had to be treated accordingly. So the old man, instead of rushing to embrace him, took an attitude of dignified composure and walked away towards the clearing where the scattered horses and other animals had resumed their grazing.

#### 4.

The group with the wounded messenger had not stopped to rest. Jonuz Bathore with his wife and his daughter had tried to convince the messenger that he needed a short rest, but he insisted on pushing ahead:

«To Peza! To Peza! Dead or alive! We have to reach Peza without losing a minute!»

Jonuz glanced at a strange young man with a partisan's cap and peasant's clothes who stalked ahead, concentrated in his own thoughts, never uttering a word.

«And you, comrade, what do you think?» Jonuz asked him with a note of reproach in his voice. «Won't you say something?»

Ismail looked at him askance and with his hand pointed to the road ahead.

«He must be dumb, by god!» said Jonuz to himself.

And the group went on.



As soon as she heard the distant hum of the plane, Hajrija stopped and asked Veli:

«Do you hear anything?»

The messenger strained his ears. At first it sounded like a column of lorries, a long way off, but he could tell from where the sound came. As it came nearer he thought that it was a column of tanks coming up the steep road behind the hills. If that was so, it meant that the Germans had started an operation against the villages surrounding Peza, but he wondered why it should come so unexpected and: how was it possible that the comrades should know nothing about it. «Perhaps that letter...» A sharp pain ran like a knife through his chest. «That letter must have contained all the details about it,» he thought in despair and a groan escaped from his throat.

«Let us get you off that horse for a moment so that you can have a little rest?» repeated Jonuz mistaking the groan.

«No, man! It is impossible. On the contrary, we

must try to go faster. We are late as it is, perhaps too late.»

They had crossed the small walley and were already on the steep climb to Baldushk when they heard the roar of the plane and saw its red and green lights. Hajrija tightened her jaws and looked frightened at Veli. The messenger, on the contrary, became suddenly gay and talkative:

«So, that is what it was, eh? It could have been much worse. What do you say, Nuzi? Come on, Hajrija, can't you walk a bit faster, my little sister?...»

«My goodness, it is coming right over us,» cried Jonuz's wife without changing the position of the heavy load she was carrying. «Look! Look!»

Before she could finish her words the plane banked, turned back, dropped its umbrella of light and opened fire with its machine-gun.

«Aha! They are showing their usual 'bravery' against women and children that are coming behind us,» said the messenger. «Hurry up, comrades, hurry up!».

### CHAPTER III

#### 1

As they approached the village of Baldushk, Veli heard some sounds that showed him that something unusual was happening there. Though it was midnight, from the village came voices of people and the neighing of horses. These sounds, becoming clearer because of

the occasional gusts of wind, were familiar to him. He had acquaintances in almost every village of the Peza region, but these voices were somehow different from those of the villagers. Perhaps comrades from town had come to Baldushk, like in the village he had just left. But there was a difference: he could not hear voices of women and children. Then he heard clearly the voice of a man repeating: «Come on, faster, haven't you finished yet?» It reminded him of the voice of the caterer of the third battalion.

It was obvious that there was something new in the air. These were signs of preparation against an attack. The messenger felt a sense of relief and excitement. «I don't know how,» he thought, «but the command of the group must have learned about the coming operation and is taking the necessary measures.» He was no longer anxious about the letter he had not been able to deliver, and at the same time the pain from his wound had diminished.

«Hajrija, my little sister, try to go a little faster, come on,» he pleaded again.

Hajrija turned to look at him as if wanting to show him her face flushed and covered with perspiration. Then she made another effort to make the horse go faster. The horse also was wet with perspiration, and foaming. Every now and then its shoes hit a stone with a metallic click.

«It was bound to happen, one can't help it,» sighed the messenger.

Jonuz and his wife replied something, but Veli was not listening. His attention was drawn by the silhouette of a man standing on a mound by the road, motionless like the trunk of a tree.

The horse stopped and pointed its ears ahead. Despite Hajrija's efforts, it refused to go any further.

«What is the matter with the horse?» asked Jonuz, who had been looking only at the horse and had not seen the figure ahead of them.



The man stepped down from the mound and called:

«Halt! Who are you.»

«Travellers, comrade, what else can we be?» said Veli with irritation.

«Travellers, very well, but you should not get irritated; we have our regulations here.»

The guard came closer and, having exchanged a few words with his comrade, who had suddenly emerged from behind a bush, he stepped on the road.

«Who is that on the horse!» he asked Hajrija, who hadn't enough breath to answer him.

«A man, comrade, a man like all the rest, can't you see me?» replied the messenger instead of the girl.

«Half of a man, even as it were. Wounded...»

The guard raised his eyes in surprise as if expecting something unusual to happen.

«Look here, wait a minute.» he muttered rubbing his eyes with the back of his hand, then pulled off his cap and turned to the messenger. «Will you tell me who are you?»

This time his tone was softer and less commanding than it was a minute before.

«I am Trako Marko. Do you want to see my identity card?»

«He is funny, that partisan,» thought Hajrija. «But Veli also is acting strangely. Why can't he tell him who he is and have done with it?»

«Please, don't get upset,» said the guard in a more conciliatory tone. «Aren't you that comrade? Yes... of course you are!»

The messenger shrugged his shoulders and smiled, still irritated.

«I don't understand, comrade. Whom do you have in mind?»

«The one that was wounded the night before. He

was a messenger or something...I have forgotten the name.»

«The messenger Veli, you mean?» asked Jonuz.

«Yes, that's it. The messenger Veli. Is that he?»

«He in person.»

«Yes, of course. It is he indeed. It had gone out of my mind.»

The guard dropped the automatic-gun on the ground and, still holding his cap in one hand, rushed to embrace the messenger. «How are you now? How do you feel? How did it happen? Eh,...if you only knew... We thought you were dead and we wept with bitter tears for you, by my ideal! Last night the commissar told us about you...»

Veli did not know what to think. He tried to ask the man about what exactly had happened, but the man gave him no opportunity.

«...Then there was that letter you had brought... It saved the situation. And how clever it was on the part of that nurse to think of it! She is a clever one, indeed. 'Let me take that vest with me' she had said to herself, 'it doesn't matter that it is old; it must have news inside. There must be some sense in what the wounded messenger said in his sleep'.»

While speaking he put his hand in his pocket and pulled out a packet of cigarettes.

«Here, have a fag. Help yourselves you too,» he offered the packet to Jonuz and Ismail. — They have given us ready-made cigarettes this time. I am not used to them. I would rather have cigarettes that I roll myself, and tobacco that I grind myself...I used to have an acre of land in Mallakastra and I grow some fine tobacco on it. You can't find the like of it anywhere else. Eh, but now we have other things to worry about.»

«We come from the same region, it seems,» said the messenger.

«Why? Where do you come from?»

«From the Kudhesh village. Only a river divides us.»

«Is that true? Of course, I should have known it by the way you talk. So, only a river divides us, eh? I have my nephews in Kudheshi? My name is Baxhul Bushi but they call me Babush. The commissar also calls me Babush. Funny, eh?»

«It is all right,» smiled the messenger. «Take care of yourself, of your health, that is what counts... But tell me comrade Babush, who was the commissar who spoke about me last night?»

«The commissar of the group. That young fellow, who is not much to look at, but knows how to give their due to both the big ones of the Balli and of the Germans. Eh, what a man! If you could only hear him tell us about you! 'Yes, comrades,' he said at the end. 'Such are the men of the Party. Men like the messenger Veli, who, even when he had lost his senses and was fighting with death, he could think of nothing else but of the letter he had sewn in his vest.'»

«Comrade Toja!» muttered the messenger with emotion and turned aside his face to hide his tears. «Take me down. It is all over now, and I can do with a little rest, can't I, Hajrija?»

The girl let go the horse's rope and ran to the messenger who was reaching to take her hands. When they set him on the grass, she sat down beside him saying nothing and holding in her small hands the rough burning hands of the wounded messenger.

As dawn approached, scattered rifle shots were heard from the east. Veli, who had slept three full hours and felt much better having had his wound dressed, pushed aside his blankets and walked with some effort to the window. The crescent moon, no bigger than a bull's horn had risen high in the sky and whitened a large portion of the darkness surrounding it. The plain and the low hills ranging as far as the foot of the mountain, were covered with a transparent white layer of mist that changed and softened the nature's colours. The village was quiet. Only from the house surrounded by the high hedge came the snorts of the horse that was enjoying its early meal.

Veli leaned over the window sill and looked out. Muffled snoring came from three partisans who were sleeping huddled together by the wall of the house, covered with their coats. One of them stood up, looked towards the east and, seeing that the moon had risen high in the sky, cried to the others: «Get up, you lazy pigs, it is time for lunch!»

The messenger recognized Baxhuli's voice.

«Get up, you bastards! Can't you see it is daytime already?» shouted again Baxhuli with his thick voice. «Ehe! These fellows seem to have in mind to sleep all day long. Get up, I say!»

One of the partisans raised his head reluctantly, but seeing how early it was, cursed the disturber and lay down again.

«Look at them! And they call themselves partisans!» said Baxhuli with mock contempt.

«Leave us alone, comrade. We are still too young and we need more sleep to grow up.»

«Young, you say? Is that the way the young behave? Young I call that boy about whom the commissar spoke to us. It is him I call young, not you, you little bastards!»

Veli drew back from the window.

«Can't you mind your own business?» continued the young man's voice. «It is too early in the night for your propaganda work. Let us sleep at least till the sun comes up.»

«Why shouldn't I do my propaganda work? You clearly need it.» added Baxhuli walking nervously up and down.

This exchange of polite remarks waked up the other partisans who were sleeping in the garden further away. A general stir followed about the house. Willy-nilly the two comrades got up, but they continued their argument.

«I have no alarm clock to know the exact time. I thought it was late, that is why I awoke you. What do you want now?»

«We want compensation.»

«What can that be?»

«Oh, nothing much. Only a cigarette each from the packet you keep for special occasions.»

Baxhul's frown softened.

«Here, have one each of you, you rascals.» He offered them the packet but preferred to roll for himself a cigarette from his tobacco pouch.

By and by other young people gathered around Baxhul, mostly partisans and two or three civilians. Last came an old man leading a heavily loaded horse. The man himself was carrying something heavy on his shoulders. He stepped over the hedge and walked towards Baxhuli.

«Now, who can that be?» asked Baxhuli and, turning to the man, scolded him: «As if what you have put on your horse wasn't enough, you had to carry yourself so much stuff.»

«Well, my son, it has to be done.»

«Are you in your right mind? People are running for their life, while you have taken your whole household with you.»

«I am telling you I had to do it,» said the old man with a tone of importance. «I am asking nothing from you, I only want you to tell me which is the way to Peza.»

«To Peza, eh!» laughed Baxhuli. «What do you want to go to Peza for? The Germans aren't coming here, you can take that from me. Just put your things in some house here and don't tire your horse any further.»

The old man frowned.

«You ought to stop being funny,» he said to Baxhuli. «You ought to have asked me first what I was carrying and where I was going and then give me your piece of mind. I am carrying no household things and I am most worried about this machine here,» he said uncovering the typewriter he was carrying on his shoulders. «The things on the horse too were entrusted to me by the Party to carry them to Peza. Do you see what I mean now? And if you want to know who I am, they call me Uncle Jazi.»

The old man pulled the reins of the horse and walked off without another word.

Baxhuli was so astonished that he remained with his mouth open, looking right and left as if expecting the others to help him out of that uncomfortable situation.

«Hey, wait a minute, wait a minute,» he called to the old man who was turning to the right corner of the road to the right.

S

Dawn was filtering through the window when Jo-

nuz Bathore entered on tiptoe into the room of the wounded messenger. He saw that Veli was awake, and looking out of the window and came closer.

«Good morning, Veli, how do you feel now?»

Veli looked up startled.

«Oh, well enough, thank you. What have you been doing?» In the dim light his face looked the colour of bronze. Jonuz noticed that he had tied a headkerchief on his head and, thinking he might have fever, touched Veli's forehead with his hand.

«No, I am all right. The headkerchief is Hajrija's; she tied it round my head last night, and I have forgotten to take it off.»

«Well, thank god... I also slept here, in the next room. I took my wife and the girl to a friend and came back late... Eh, this is a devil of a business...»

Jonuz paused for a while as if intending to say something important.

Baxhuli's voice was heard again from the yard.

«We are still too young, uncle, and we make mistakes. But I could not let you go like that, alone.»

«It is all right, don't bother,» replied Uncle Jazi.

«It is that partisan who stopped us last night on the road,» explained Veli to Jonuz. «And that old man with him, he is a true patriot... His son is a partisan... But you were going to tell me something, weren't you?»

«Yes,... I am worried about Hajrija. She nearly died in our hands last night,» said Jonuz shaking his head.

«Why? What happened?»

«I don't really know. She just fainted,... became pale like wax,... we thought she was dead.»

«She must have been too tired. It was my fault.»

No, Veli, no. It was what my wife and I thought at first, but the doctor said it wasn't that... The doctor was the one that took care of you. He said there must be something that worries her but she isn't real-

ly ill. And, would you believe it, he was right. As soon as he went away, my wife drew me aside and said to me: 'you were wrong my man. It was I who annoyed the girl'. 'How is that?' I asked. 'She has made up her mind to join the partisans.' So you see, Veli, why I could not sleep the whole night. The girl recovered, it is true, but she can think of nothing else but joining the partisans. I don't know what to do with her.»

Veli found it difficult to remain serious.

«It isn't as bad as that.» he said. «If there is nothing wrong with her health, the rest can easily be arranged.»

«Arranged? Nothing can make her change her mind.»

«Well, then, you will have to let her go. There are a lot of partisan girls.»

«No, Veli, that wouldn't do.»

«Why not?»

«She is only a girl, not yet sixteen... And she is my only child...» Jonuz sighed as he turned his head aside.

Veli did not have the heart to oppose him there and then. In the pause that followed, they again heard Baxhuli and Uncle Jazi.

«Don't worry. Here, take another cigarette. I will find you a companion who will take you to Peza in no time, you and your horse. That is what the commissar ordered. So, you see how it is.»

«Thank, you, thank you.»

«Don't thank me but the commissar and that fellow Rexha who couldn't find words to praise you. He is a man, that one.»

«He comes from Kosova,» said Uncle Jazi proudly.

«Does he? And the girl he met here, who is she?»

«I don't know. What girl?»

«That little partisan, the one who is in my squad.



What a fine girl! Only a child, and fearless as any of them. And so pretty, too.»

Uncle Jazi smiled.

«She must have struck your fancy,» he said.

«My fancy? You can't be serious. One can't even joke with her. Nor with the others. One can't risk the most innocent joke with them. You don't know our rules. You go on trial in to time. Oho! And you talk about fancy. But look here, man, don't mention to anyone what we have been talking about, or you may cause trouble to me. That Rexha, especially, don't breathe a word about it to him.»

«Why Rexha?» asked the old man.

«Because it is only with him that she behaves freely. She must be engaged to him, or perhaps a close relation.»

«She is his sister, man, his sister,» confirmed Uncle Jazi.

The conversation in the yard stopped. Some steps were heard fading slowly away. Through the window came the first rays of the sun which was rising from among a confusion of gilt edged clouds.

The messenger looked again at Jonuz, who was pulling thoughtfully at his cigarette, and resumed his talk.

«You heard what they were saying? It was as if on purpose that the partisan was saying what I had meant to tell you. Listen to me Jonuz Bathore, don't go against the girl's wish.»

Jonuz was listening staring vacantly at the floor.

Rexha ran up the stairs and dashed into the room. «Death to fascism, comrade Veli,» he said embracing the messenger. Then he noticed Jonuz. «What? Are you here too? That's fine.»

After Rexha came Uncle Jazi and the chairman of the council, while the partisan Baxhuli remained standing by the door. From time to time he glanced at the old man and gave him a wink to remind him that he should not mention what they had been talking about earlier.

The old man shook his head and smiled.

«They told me about you but I couldn't manage to come earlier,» said Rexha to the messenger. «I have been up the whole night and even now I have no time to rest. But I am not complaining. The important thing was to do the job, and the job is done. The technical service is also in good condition. As for that business with the fritzes who wanted to take us by surprise, that also went off well. The letter did the trick, the one Zef had given you. It came to the commissar just in time, and he took the necessary steps. That was a fine job you have done, Veli.»

The messenger stirred uncomfortably.

«Gjena, comrade Rexha, Evgjenia! Had it not been for her...»

«Gjena too, of course. She has showed a rare intelligence, but your part was the hardest. Don't you think so, Jonuz?»

«So it is, surely. Half-dead as he was, he was only worried about that letter.»

«You also did a good job, Jonuz,» continued Rexha. «But I have a word with you,» he said changing the subject.

«Well, what do you want to tell me?» asked Jonuz surprised.

«It is about your daughter. You haven't treated her

properly last night, you and your wife. What do you say about that?»

— Well, ... what can I say? ... » Jonuz whispered uneasily and began to fumble in his pocket for his tobacco pouch.

«I don't think you have treated her well.»

«She is our only child, comrade Rexha.»

«Just because of it you ought to do what is best for her. But I know what worries you, Jonuz Bathore. It is your damned fanaticism. It is still blinding you, you and all our people. But you are wrong, Jonuz... Was it shame on my part that I let my sister join the partisans? She, too, was everything I had. She, too, is very young. But ask the comrades what they think of her. She is the flower of the squad, they say.»

The thin face of the peasant became even longer under the high white fez. He felt a deep pain in his heart and had no words to express his feelings. His lips were moving like those of a sick man who wants water and has no voice to ask for it.

«Don't take it so hard,» went on Rexha. «It is for you to decide. She is your daughter and nobody wants to force you to act against your wish.»

«No, Rexha,» at last Jonuz found his voice. «She isn't only mine. She is engaged to be married, and do you know to whom? To the son of our hodja. And you could never make a hodja accept such a situation.»

«Is that so?» Rexha pretended to be surprised. «That seems a serious obstacle... Eh, Jonuz, Jonuz!»

The sun was already high above the horizon. People were moving in the field. The plain and the low hills were covered with a golden blanket of ripe wheat, while here and there with square patches of dark green maize. Big oak trees, scattered singly and well apart from the huddled up olive groves, were standing proudly upright, throwing their long shadows over the ground. A group of partisans with their rifles slung over their shoulders were moving rapidly towards the

village, while in the opposite direction some rare peasants were striding, going out to the fields, men and women carrying their farming tools.

Veli, the messenger was watching the scene with quiet happiness.

It is peaceful here, isn't it?» he said to Rexha  
Rexha nodded.

«It is obvious that the frites cannot afford an operation this time,» said Veli.

«An operation? At Peza, you say? No, they don't bother about Peza now. They have the south on their mind this time. The small raid they attempted last night was only a diversion, but all the same it cost them dearly. Now Jonuz and his wife and the chairman of the village council, who was so stubborn last night, can all return undisturbed to their homes whenever they wish. Am I not right, Jonuz?»

Jonuz, who had been absorbed in his thoughts, looked up startled.

«What did you say?»

«You can go home now, I am telling you, and your wife, too. Are you still concerned about your daughter,» said Uncle Jazi laughing.

The peasant's face brightened. He pushed his fez back, smiled shamefacedly and said:

«Thank god... But it is true, what you are saying, Uncle Jazi. I am thinking about my daughter and about my home, too. And I don't know what to do about the hodja.»

«Hey, are you crazy?» cried the partisan Baxhuli from the door. «Do you really mean to give your wonderful daughter to a son of a hodja? No, upon my ideal! I would rather kill my daughter than marry her into a hodja's family. What do you say, comrade messenger?»

Veli lowered his head and smiled.

## CHAPTER IV

### 1

After the German unsuccessful attempt at an «operation on a limited scale», the partisan forces operating between Elbasan and Kruja receive order to concentrate around Tirana and to harass the German and quisling forces of the capital. Early the next day, a detachment of the «Dajti» battalion, led by the commissar and the commander, having marched all night through the forest by Mallagesh, Killojka and Selba, reached the Priska pass and took position in the woods above the road.

The sun had climbed a fathom above the horizon when the sentry sighted a peasant coming up the Priska road carrying an empty basket which he held high to protect his eyes from the sun.

«That must be,» said the commissar and ordered the sentry to intercept the peasant as soon as he reached the highest point of the pass. Gëzimi, the commander of the company, and the squad commander ran towards him.

The peasant halted at the first call. He was a man about forty, tall and slim, with a long scar on his left cheek which seemed to have been made by a knife.

«Where are you going, uncle?» asked the company commander.

«To Shkalla, to my son-in-law. Is it forbidden?»

«No, uncle, it isn't forbidden, but first give us what you have got to give us and then go your way,» said Gëzim when he heard the password.

«The debt, you mean,» said the peasant smiling and handed him a letter which he drew from his vest. Having taken a good look at the young man, he hesitated a moment and asked:

«Aren't you Reshit Myzyri's son?»

«Yes. Do you know my father?»

«I know him. He is an old friend of mine. We were soldiers together in the years of the Austrian occupation. A good patriot.»

«Yes, and he is fond of good fighters.»

«Yes,» said Rrema sadly. «That was the cause of his bad luck. It must have been a hard blow to you, I am sure.»

«Why? What has happened? I know nothing,» said the young fellow alarmed.

The peasant set the basket on the ground and looked at him surprised.

«You mean you don't know what has happened?» he asked. «They arrested your father,» he said apologetically and put his hand on the boy's shoulder. «It was Sait Matja, that hound of the Germans, who arrested him... We were surprised even how Sait did not shoot him when your father told him all he thought of him... They say he did not shoot him because he hoped to draw some valuable information from him, but your father stood firm as a rock. And he has sworn to take his revenge... But there is still hope... Yes.»

It was clear that he said that to give heart to the young man, since he was sure that his father's fate was sealed. But Gëzimi did not show his emotion; he appeared calm and serious.

«Thank you, uncle. As for my father, I am sure he has done his duty, properly, and that means that he cannot escape from certain death.»

«Is your father young, comrade Gëzim?» asked the squad commandar in sympathy.

«Yes, not yet fifty. And they are going to kill him, the thugs, they will certainly kill him... And you, Ferik, do you have anybody in Tirana?»

«I do. They are right in the wolf's mouth... My wife and a little boy, ten years old. And they are both with the movement, especially the boy.»

«Eh, Gëzim, Gëzim! There is only one solution to it... A general attack on Tirana... But when will that happen?»

2

The commissar of the battalion frowned as he read the letter.

«The matter is getting more serious. What do you say?» he turned to Gëzim.

«I don't know, comrade commissar. What does the letter say?»

«It is about our discord with the battalion commander. The letter is from comrade Zef. He reproaches our lack of patience and demands that the commander and I should go to Peza and discuss the matter with the comrades there. We shall go, of course. I for my part am convinced that the cell's decision was right and that the commander has acted like an opportunist.»

Ferik Talo, who was standing a little aside, his dark face wearing an almost permanent natural scowl, was listening with subdued curiosity. He had heard the word «opportunist» for the first time some weeks ago, when he joined the battalion. The conflict between the leaders, which had become the concern of the whole battalion, was known to him and he was really sorry that such things should happen between comrades of arms. He was convinced that the commissar, who represented the Party, was right, but now the District

Committee, which was a higher instance and a more authoritative arbiter of such matters, appeared to be against the commissar. «How is one to tell the right from the wrong in these questions?» Ferik was asking himself. «I was right when I refused the post of squad commander, but the battalion commissar insisted so much that I had to accept. He said that, as a member of the working class, I could manage any job and had no right to refuse any task the Party gave me. Now had the commissar been wrong in appointing me to the job?»

«So you must go» said Gëzim thoughtfully. «Will you take a squad with you?»

Gëzim asked that question not because he thought the commissar needed an escort but because he himself wanted to go to Peza and had not decided how to formulate his request.

The commissar had seen it through.

«Would you like to come with us?» he asked.

«Yes, very much,» replied Gëzim frankly.

«Why?»

Gëzim was taken aback because he did not want to tell the true reason. For three months he had been company commander in the «Dajti» battalion to which he was assigned since he recovered from the wound received during the German encirclement of the Third brigade and he had never asked to leave the company. On the contrary, ever since he learned about the tragic events of Tujan, when the comrades of the «Dajti» battalion had been intercepted by the German and quisling forces, while he himself was under the care of the doctors and of the good nurse Evgjenia, he had become so fond of that battalion that he had been ready to join it even before his wound had healed.

«Speak, man,» laughed the commissar. «what makes you want all of a sudden to go to Peza, you that even the fritz's guns could not dislodge from the bat-



talion? Do you have anything in your head which you want to keep it to yourself? Can it be a fiancé we know nothing about?»

«No, comrade commissar, there are no complications of that kind for me, but I have some friends in Peza and I would like to see them. There is a lot of traffic between Peza and Tirana whereas from here...»

The commissar shook his head unconvinced. Ferik could see the expression of commissar's face and intervened.

«He has a good reason, comrade commissar, but he finds it hard to talk about it. They have arrested his father, and it is feared that they are going to shoot him.»

«So? When did it happen?»

«Some days ago. The peasant with the basket told us.»

The commissar was moved.

«So they have arrested Reshit, the criminals!» he murmured and raised his eyes towards Tirana.

Gëzim and Ferik also looked in the same direction. They saw the town white and sparkling under the bright May sun.

«All right, comrade Gëzim, you may come, of course... As for the squad...», the commissar looked at Ferik smiling. «it will be the turn of this 'lion's' squad this time, I believe the commander won't refuse. Am I wrong, comrade Ferik?»

«The only thing I'm waiting for is just your order, comrade commissar.»

«Order? Very well! I will talk to the battalion commander and let you know. In the meantime you can make your preparations. We leave this evening.»

Travelling at night through enemy controlled territory presented no particular difficulty for the partisans. There were certain risks, of course, and chances had to be taken. One could never be sure that down there behind a bush where the path turned to the left, or further still where it skirted the village fountain, they wouldn't run into an enemy ambush. The partisan squad was usually well informed about the enemy movements during the day, and they knew that there were no enemies in the neighbouring villages, but it could not be excluded that for some reason, which not at all connected with the movements of that particular squad, an enemy force might take an unexpected position just before the squad had entered the village.

Ferik had experienced such surprises in the past and, that's why after having consulted the leaders, he had taken all the necessary measures.

The order to start was given late in the afternoon, before the rise of the moon. The password was «Forest plough». Ferik gave his last instructions to the two partisans who were to act as vanguard, exchanged a few words with the comrades of the staff and joined the squad which had already formed its single file. The path ran alongside the dry bed of the torrent that flanked the lower part of the village.

A light breeze was cooling the air and the light was sufficient to distinguish the path.

«The nights are brighter this side of Dajti,» said Gëzim in undertones to the battalion commander who was walking immediately behind him.

«It is only an impression of yours Gëzim, but I know these parts of the country better than you do.»

«No, comrade commander, my eyes never mislead me.»

«Gëzim is right,» intervened the commissar, «the sun here sets later than on the other side.»

«Wrong again, comrade commissar,» replied the commander ironically. «You don't take into account the moonlight which first falls down on the other side.»

Ferik, who had no fixed place in the file but shuttled from its front to its rear and back again, caught the words of the commander and said to himself: «They are at it again, damn nuisance!» And yet, it was good they spoke to each other, it would have been much worse if they were not on speaking terms. Thank God, there was the Party to see to it that they did not go too far. The Party! He often thought about it. He pictured the Party in his imagination as something big, strong and very much alive, an eye that saw everything, a mind that understood everything, an organization that acted all the time, and yet remained invisible.

Lately Ferik had been advised to apply for party membership and that had made him happy, but at the same time, it had set him thinking. The Party! It wasn't a thing to be taken lightly.

Undisturbed they reached the little village of Fikas by the Erzen River. Father Llani, a member of the village council, had been notified and had come to meet them. The two vanguard partisans recognized his high white fez and the way his stick knocked against the stones, so he did not need call the password he had repeated several times to be sure not to forget it. As soon as they saw the old man, the commissar, the commander and the other partisans ran up to him and hugged him one by one. The old man knew almost all the men of the battalion and was very fond of them. He could not forget the first action carried out by the battalion when it had attacked the army stores and distributed sugar among the villagers.

Father Llani had seen it with his own eyes and since then had often mentioned it in his talks with his friends.

But tonight he had too many things on his hands to go on talking with the partisans. First he asked them if they had had any supper and, being assured that they needed nothing, led the way through gardens and hedges to the bridge. There he asked them to sit down and rest, while he walked into a garden, filled his big handkerchief with cherries and came back to distribute them among the partisans.

«Cherries!» said Ferik surprised. «Ripe so early!» and instead of starting to eat them like the others, he stood staring at them and at the old man in delighted wonder.

«Where do you come from young man?» asked father Llani.

«From the south.» replied Ferik, who did not know his exact birthplace.

«From the south? Then you should not be surprised. Cherries get ripe earlier down there in the south.»

«It may be as you say,» laughed Ferik.

«It is as I say. You know, when we take in our village our first baskets of cherries to Tirana hoping to get a good price for them, we find that those from Vlora are already there. And so we remain with our unsold cherries in our baskets... And do you know who finally buys them? Some street urchins who fill paper horns with them and sell them a quarter of a lek the horn. They do it to earn their bread. Once one of them asked me the whole basket. 'All right, my boy, you can have it one lek cheaper. I can see you are in need, I said. He counted the moneu he had in his pocket then looking up at me ashamed. 'I am sorry, he said, I am one lek short. By the way he talked he seemed a Tosk. A thumb of a boy, but he looked so clever; his eyes were like live coals. 'It is all right,' I told him and emptied my basket into his. 'You can pay me your lek another time.' He blushed,

asked me for my name and assured me that he wouldn't forget his debt. That day I left the town later than usual. I had put my basket on my beast and walked behind it leisurely along the Elbasan road. God knows where my thoughts were when I heard someone running after me. It was that same boy. 'Father Llani,' he cried, 'here is the lek I owe you, thank you very much, I already sold the cherries.' At first I refused to take it, but he insisted saying that we peasants are as badly off as the poor folks of the town. My heart went to him. Since that day I have been to Tirana several times and hoped to see him again but I haven't met him any more.»

After some minutes of silence when only the murmur of the river could be heard, the two vanguard partisans came back from their reconnaissance and gave the all clear.

«Let us go,» said commissar, «thank you, father Llani.»

They got up one by one, formed the file and walked off. Only Ferik remained behind with the old man.

The commissar looked at him with curiosity but said nothing. It was the first time Ferik had not asked for more details about the situation ahead of them.

As he saw the commissar walking off, Ferik turned to the old man.

«You say you did not meet that boy again?»

«No, my son, and I would very much like to see him again.»

«Can anything have happened to him?»

«God knows. But why should anything happen to such a little fellow?» The old man was thoughtful for a while. Then he asked: «Why are you asking?»

«I am sure that that boy was my son, father Llani, and it is such a long time since I saw him last.»

The old man regarded him with compassion.

«Are you sure? He is such a fine lad, may God protect him... So, you haven't seen him all that time?...

Eh, this war has been too hard on all of us. But I will try to find him. Tomorrow it is market day and I will surely find him. And if you happen to pass this way another time, I will have news for you. Go join your comrades now, farewell. As for the boy, I will do my best to find him.»

The old man took Ferik's hand in both his hands and shook it warmly. Ferik ran quickly to catch up with the others.

Ferik stopped by the side of the road to look right and left and listen. He heard the dull rumble of motors coming from the Kërraba mountain. It was the by now familiar noise of an enemy lorry column approaching from their left. He tightened the cartridge belt round his waist, took the automatic-gun in both his hands, his finger on the trigger, and prepared to cross the road stealthily. He had not taken three steps when the highlights of a car caught him and illuminated the whole stretch of the road in front of him. Instinctively, instead of dashing across the road, Ferik stopped and made to retrace his steps. But at that moment a savage «Halt!» was heard, followed by a spurt of a machine-gun fire. He stopped short, threw himself on the ground and rolled over to the side of the road from which he had come. Over his head whistled hundreds of bullets from various fire-arms.

He crawled behind a heap of stones two or three meters to his right and took position. Then he saw that the entire road descending from the Kërraba Pass was filled with lorries from which hundreds of automatic—guns were pouring their fire on both sides of the road. He thought his position was quite safe, unless the Germans decided to stop and seek him out, but he knew that they usually preferred to avoid night clashes. He was more worried about his comrades, because much of the firing was directed the way they had gone.

He loosened the kerchief he kept tied round his

neck and began to wipe the sweat from his face, but he felt it wet and dripping with something sticky. It was blood, for sure; he was wounded and had not noticed it. He began to feel for his wound but was not much concerned because he felt no weakness or pain.

4

The commissar was sitting beside Ferik, who could not get over his despair for what had happened. He explained to the commissar why he had stopped to talk to the old man Llani and cursed himself for having done it.

«You don't say so! So, he was your son, the boy with the cherries?» said the commissar greatly surprised and deeply moved. I'm not of the same opinion with you, comrade Ferik. You did not disobey your orders. After all, what are we fighting for? Why are we risking our lives? Isn't it for that boy of yours and thousands like him? They are the future of our country which we are fighting to liberate.»

He paused to see what impression his words had made on Ferik. The wounded man seemed to recover from his despair. He started to say something, but it came out in disconnected fragments:

«How should I know? You may be right... I... my boy... Ah, comrade commissar!»

«So it is,» said the commissar patting him his shoulder. I myself am still too young to have children whom I could love. But I remember my father's sufferings and his great concern for me when I was just a kid. I can't forget the last moments before he died. My mother was weeping by his side and I, unable to

understand what was happening, stood staring at his rapidly waning face. He was obviously making an effort to keep his eyes open and look at me. 'Don't worry about the boy,' said my mother wiping her tears. 'I shall bring him up with these hands of mine, and she showed him her hands. Then my father seemed to calm down and quietly closed his eyes. 'He is dead!' my mother cried out and began her lamentation. Only then I realized what had happened.»

«Was your mother young?» asked Ferik who wanted the commissar to continue.

«Young, yes, and a hard worker. But she too died two years later and left me homeless. But, as you see, I managed to grow up.»

Ferik shook his head in a way that was not clear what he meant by it.

«Are you still doubting?» the commissar asked. «He will grow up, your son, even without your aid. You and I and thousands like us have grown up orphans, in the street, with nobody to look after us. But your son and all the children of his generation shall be much luckier than we were, even if they remain orphans. We will win the war, won't we? Yes, of course, we will. You don't have any doubt about it, either. But the problem for us is not to allow this victory to be enjoyed by those who have never cared about the people, who only thought how better to oppress and exploit us as much as possible. The Party, which so successfully has united the people in their war for liberation, has prepared also its programme for the period after the war. And it won't let the guilty escape from the deserved punishment. No, they will all have to answer for their crimes to the people. We shall have a new regime, the people's regime, and a new justice, the people's justice: Do you think we will again leave the power in the hands of the beys and agas to lord it over the workers and peasants with their whips? No, Ferik, no! You will soon be yourself



a party member and you have much to learn if you want to make these things clear to the people.»

This time Ferik nodded without hesitation holding his head high because he saw solid truth in the words of the commissar.

## CHAPTER V

### I

A half dilapidated old house hidden among the trees, with the sun-baked brick wall covered by ivy and the doorway missing its sides, served as the headquarters. People came in and went out through the doorway. The partisan Baxhuli, an Italian automatic-gun slung over his shoulder, was on sentry-go before the door.

Whenever an unfamiliar face appeared, he would come out and begin with: «Where are you from, comrade? What is your name? What business do you have with the comrades of the Peza staff?» and other questions of the kind.

If the answers he received did not convince him, he would ask the person to wait at the door with a: «We shall ask first» and would go in to get instructions.

That is what happened to the commissar of the «Dajti» battalion with Baxhuli.

Judging from the commissar's clothes and weapons, Baxhuli to say the truth, guessed that the new

commer was not a simple partisan but he did not like his airs when, without paying any attention at all to the guard, the commissar passed the threshold, rushing towards the entrance where the staff had its headquarters.

Baxhuli got in his way and blocking the stairs, began with his questions: «Where are you, comrade, coming from? Why do you want to meet the comrades of the staff?»

The commissar smiled.

«I'm coming from Priska. I'm from the «Dajti» battalion. That's all what I can tell you.»

«Ah, so. Then, we shall ask first...»

«There is nothing to ask for. I'm at home here.» And saying nothing more, the commissar followed Baxhuli upstairs.

«Perhaps you are a commissar?» asked Baxhuli at the entrance.

«Yes. The commissar of the battalion.»

«But why didn't you tell me at the very beginning comrade commissar? Or did you want to test my vigilance? Ahua! It's a very long time since I have seen the sun for the first time; there is nobody who can pull my leg. But come, this way, please! There is no need of asking permission for the commissars.»

«Is that so? That's fine. In a while the commander of the battalion is coming, too. You don't need to ask any permission for him either. So don't stop him. Is that clear?»

«Yes, it's quite clear.»

When going downstairs, Baxhuli heard the comrades of the staff laughing loudly and he shook his head; «They are laughing at me, of course. Who knows what the commissar is driving at, what stories he is telling them about me. He took me for a silly man. But it doesn't matter. It was good he didn't understand that I did it to him on purpose.»

When reaching the door he started again his sentry-go, but he could not take out from his mind the incident with the commissar. «He! The man wanted to enter as if he was at his father's home. But why, my dear friend? What was wrong with your asking my permission, first? Am I or I'm not responsible in my own business? Or do you think they have put me here to mind the hens? You are a commissar..., that's very well, I don't care a fig. Comrade Toja is a commissar, too, even at a higher post than yours but he is quite of another stuff. Comrade Toja. However it doesn't matter...»

A man in partisan clothes, his face of wheat colour, with moustaches, appeared coming towards the entrance of the headquarters. He kept his cap a little aside, he was dressed in a new shirt and his cartridge-belts were quite new, too; all this gave him a dandified appearance but Baxhuli liked his bright face and smiling eyes and wished he was the very commander of the battalion.

Coming quite near, the man in partisan clothes saluted Baxhuli with a: «Death to fascism!» and asked if the commissar of the «Dajti» battalion had entered the headquarters, asking at the same time Baxhuli's permission to let him go inside since they two had to be there together.

Extremely satisfied with such a conduct, Baxhuli stood at attention and said that commissars and commanders were always welcome.

The commander stepped smiling over the threshold.

«He is a commander, every inch of him,» said Baxhuli to himself, pulling his cap over his left eye and beginning to pace to and fro in front of the door.

After two days in Peza, the partisan squad of the «Dajti» battalion was preparing to return to its own zone of action. About an hour before starting, Ferik was summoned to receive his orders and saw his superiors, the commissar and the commander of his battalion, taking their leave of the commissar of the staff, Toja, embracing each other and laughing heartily. Ferik had met Toja two months ago when he first came as a partisan, but this time he was particularly impressed by Toja's friendly ways with the leaders of the «Dajti» battalion. He was also glad to see that the commander, though somewhat older than Toja, was behaving towards him with dignified and due respect. The commander frankly admitted that he was to blame for his controversy with the commissar and said that he was much indebted to the comrades of the staff and, in particular, to comrade Toja for their intervention and for showing him where he had been wrong. They had succeeded in putting an end to a situation which could have gone too far and made it impossible for him to remain any longer in the battalion. This apology of the commander made Ferik feel extremely happy.

«That is the way it should be! Not like those dirty bourgeois who spoil their friendship and then go so far as to kill each other,» he said to Gëzim as they were preparing to start.

«Of course! Did you think the Party would let you do as you like? No comrade.»

«That is fine! From now on things are going to change in our battalion. Shall we start tonight?»

«Yes,» said Gëzim half-heartedly. «We belong to the battalion. I am sorry I could learn nothing about my father.»

«Neither did I about my son.» sighed Ferik.

«Eh, my boys, what do you say? Shall we start for home?» said the commander.

«We are ready, comrade commander,» replied Ferik.

«Not you,» said the commissar.

Ferik was taken aback. He did not ask why he was not going but looked at Gëzim with surprise. Gëzim nudged him with his elbow, inciting him to ask for an explanation.

«You will stay here for a few days. There is a new order for you,» added the commissar. «The command of the group needs you. You can't refuse. Is that clear?»

«Yes, it is, comrade commissar.»

### 3

That night Ferik could not fall asleep as he usually did as soon as he laid his head on his knapsack. Despite the good bed and the clean sheets, he turned in his bed for a long time before he closed his eyes. At first he tried to work out the reason why they wanted him at Peza. Then his thoughts wandered to his wife and his son, to the comrades with whom he had parted two days before at the Priska Pass, to that old peasant Llani and finally to his incident with the German column by the Erzen River.

He felt asleep just as he was recalling the moment when he had heard Gëzim asking for the password. Then, instead of Gëzim, he saw a big German with a gun in one hand taking aim at Gëzim's head, while with the other hand strangling his son Filo, who was

kicking helplessly with foam coming from his mouth. Ferik jumped to his feet and, half-asleep, rushed to go out but he stumbled in the darkness, took the direction opposite to the door and fell over a comrade, who was sleeping soundly.

«What the devil?» cried the comrade reaching for his automatic-gun.

«It is nothing, comrade, don't bother.»

«How nothing? You tread on my belly and say it is nothing?»

«I didn't mean to do it, comrade, I am sorry.»

«You didn't mean to do it, but you almost crushed me. Who are you, by the way?»

«A guest.»

Baxhuli lighted his cigarette lighter, approached it to Ferik's face and, as he did not recognize him, began his series of questions:

«A guest, you say? Let us see what you look like. Where did you come from? Who told you to sleep in the commissar's bed?» Then he lighted the oil lamp that was hanging on the wall.

Ferik patiently explained how he happened to be there.

«Aha! I get it now. But I have seen you somewhere before. Weren't you with that fat nurse?» And to show his good will, he offered Ferik a cigarette. «Here, have a fag, first. We people from Labëria are quickly irritated, but as soon as we see that the other fellow means no trouble, we cool down just as quickly... Where do you come from?»

«From the Myzeqe plain.»

«Aha...» Baxhuli screwed his mouth disappointed.

«Doesn't that seem good enough?» Ferik asked smiling and sat down on the side of the bed.

«It isn't that, but you don't look like Myzeqar.

«Why? In what do we differ from the others?»

Baxhuli scratched his head thoughtfully.

«I can't tell, by God, but there must be a reason why people don't appreciate your bravery. You don't seem to take to arms as we from Labëria do, but you must be different, you seem quick on the trigger.»

«That isn't true,» said Ferik seriously. «I am one of the last Myzeqars to come out with the partisans; the others have been long ago in the mountains. Don't forget that the Myzeqars have to fight in the open, on flat ground, and to face the German tanks in the open is harder than to ambush them from the rocks of Labëria.»

«What do you mean? Do you mean to say that we from Labëria can't fight in the open? Then why did the Germans send all those troops against us? Was it only to make a show?»

Twice Baxhuli pulled his tobacco pouch from his pocket and twice he put it back without rolling a cigarette. Ferik saw that he had irritated the man and tried to appease him.

«You took my words too much to heart, comrade; I meant it only as a joke. Everybody knows that you from Labëria are brave and that you have bravery in blood. But all the same, we from the Myzeqe don't lag too far behind, particularly in this war; the battalions and brigades are full of our boys and girls. As for what they say about the Myzeqar's being unused to arms there is some truth in it, but there is also a reason for it.»

«A reason?» laughed Baxhuli. «What reason, you poor devil? They are used to bow to the beys instead of showing them their teeth. A Lab would never accept such treatment. Isn't that so?»

«Yes, it is so, but have you ever asked yourself why it is so?»

Baxhuli looked at him with curiosity. This Myzeqar seemed to have a ready answer to everything.

«Let me tell you,» continued Ferik. «Your Labs have

always been in a different position. The Lab has often lived with his family in mountain caves, having only two goats to look after and a gun over his shoulder, never being obliged to bend his head before the bey or the aga, whereas the Myzeqar has never had land of his own or pasture for his animals, and, what is worse, he has had no place to go and hide if he dared oppose his master. A gun was of no use to him in such circumstances. He could only choose between obeying to the bey or drowning himself and his children in the lake. Of course, it was not easy to do away with himself and his family, so he had to bow before the bey, but there was always a fire burning in his heart. Now, at last, he sees where he must look for hope and support and he no longer hesitates to turn against the bey. . . .»

«The bey. . . ,» Baxhuli smiled with glad anticipation. «Like the one to whom we are invited to dinner tomorrow.»

«To whom?» asked Ferik.

Baxhuli looked confused. He had been about to let escape something that he was supposed to keep to himself and tried to set right his indiscretion.

«It is about a scoundrel. . . . But it is supposed to be a secret so I shouldn't be giving away anything about it. But go on with your talk about the Myzeqars.»

Ferik complied. He leaned more comfortably against the pillow and spoke long about Myzeqe and its people.

After a certain time Baxhuli, either because Ferik had succeeded in convincing him or simply because he was still tired and wanted to get some more sleep, admitted that Myzeqars were not after all what he had thought them to be.

«It is funny, eh?» he started to apologize. «I have never thought that way about what you have just told me. But, you know, I have never been to school



and have no learning. It seems you have been to school, haven't you?»

«Yes, for a time,» laughed Ferik.

«Of course... You seem to know everything. You have a sharp tongue, while I have only reached as far as the letter 'K' of the ABC. The comrades of the company are all the time over my head trying to learn me. But it is of no use. I am no good at learning. But they won't leave me alone. It isn't that I don't want to learn, and I envy the others for having learned to read and write so quickly, while I am still so far behind. And as if that isn't enough, they criticize me at every meeting. I can stand it no longer, upon my ideal. They say it is an order of the Party, else I would have known how to send them packing.»

Having said that, Baxhuli did not wait to hear Ferik's opinion but burrowed his head in the pillow and began to snore.

«Funny!...» mused Ferik.

He put out the lamp and tried to get some sleep.

4

It was still dark when two partisans came to call Baxhuli. He woke up, grabbed his automatic-gun, put on his cap and stumbled across the floor in the darkness.

«Where did you leave your comrade?» asked one of the partisans.

«My comrade? What comrade?» said Baxhuli rubbing his eyes. He remembered when he saw Ferik coming out holding in one hand his automatic-gun and his cartridge-belt and trying to put the other hand through the sleeve of his jacket.

«Are you the comrade from the «Dajti» battalion?» asked the partisan. «The commissar Toja wants to see you.»

«Now I see...» said Baxhuli shaking his head as he rolled a thick cigarette and was about to light it.

«What do you see, Babush?»

«I see that this fellow is a deep one... That he isn't the simple yokel he wanted me to believe he was.»

«Is that so? How did you manage to see through him so quickly?»

«I know, I know. Else the commissar wouldn't have sent you for him. It has to do with fat belly, I am sure... Eh, I wish they would leave him to me. I would know what to do with him!»

Ferik did not know what they were talking about but he showed no curiosity and followed silently the two partisans towards the house in which the staff had its headquarters.

Three men were coming out of the house. Ferik recognized the commissar Toja. On his right was Piciruku in simple partisan's uniform, his small shrunken face making him look older than he was. The other man was a civilian. Ferik did not remember to have seen him before. He was tall and slim, with regular features, wearing an ordinary civilian suit, but instead of a hat, he had a stripped cap turned backward which did not go with his suit.

«This is Ferik for whom you were asking, comrade Rexha,» said the commissar presenting him.

«Is that the man?» said Rexha laughing and shook hands with him heartedly. «Yes, I wanted to meet the father of the boy whom I know so well. How are you, Ferik? How do you like it here? It is certainly better than sweating in that brick factory... You were concerned about your son they told me. He is perfectly well. Brave and Philosopher as they actually call him.»

Ferik's face flushed with satisfaction. He was so moved that he could only manage to say «thank you».

«Comrade Rexha is a member of our Central Committee in Tirana and is well informed about everything,» explained the commissar Toja. «Indeed, your son seems to be an extraordinary little fellow... But now let me tell you why we held you here in Peza.»

Piciruku, his hands deep in the pockets of his trousers, was watching Ferik from the corner of his eyes. The wound on his left cheek was healing under a healthy crust but the iodine had left a dark reddish stain on the skin.

«You know Galip Bey Frakulla?» asked the commissar.

«Galip Bey?» Ferik raised his eyes astonished. His face had grown pale and the stain on his cheek had taken a brown shade. He felt his mouth go dry and could not say another word.

Piciruku took his hands out of his pockets and looked him straight in the eyes.

«What is the matter with you man? Are you so scared of that scoundrel?... Don't you know that he is in our hands and we can do what we like with him.»

Ferik looked at him as if he could not believe his words.

«Yes, that is true,» said the commissar. «Don't you believe it?»

«I know that he is staying in Lushnja. I wonder what can have brought him here in Peza.»

«You aren't well informed,» said the commissar frowning. «Galip Bey Frakulla has transferred his headquarters to Tirana.»

«To Tirana?» Ferik was alarmed. «But in that case...» He did not finish his thought and looked helplessly at the comrades.

«Well, go on. What were you going to say?»

Ferik smiled bitterly.

«I have suffered terribly from that criminal and I wonder if he has traced down my wife and the boy in Tirana... In that case they are in serious trouble... But...» He looked again at Rexha. «Did you have some bad news that you didn't dare tell me?»

Rexha laughed.

«No, no. Don't worry about your family. We communists are straightforward in such matters. We say directly what we want to say and don't go beating about the bush. Your wife and the boy are fine. That is all. But I would like to know why you complain of Galip Bey who says he is so grateful to you.»

«Grateful? Galip Bey?»

«Yes, why do you wonder?»

«I think you are mistaken. The man you are talking about must be someone else.»

«No. We are sure he is Galip Bey Frakulla. He says that he knows you well, that you were a servant at his house and that he has treated and brought you up like his own son. He also says that he found a bride for you, the daughter of a friend of his, who was also brought up at his house. Isn't that true?»

People usually get angry when they hear such lies. Ferik, on the contrary, replied by laughing loudly. It was the first time during his partisan life that such a thing was happening to him, especially before superiors. Seeing commissar Toja and the others looked at each other with surprise he pulled himself together, and frowning and shaking his head threateningly began to talk slowly as if to himself:

«Then it must be true that the bey is in deep trouble... , and is resorting to cheap flattery... And he pretends to have brought me up like his own son, the butcher! And to have married me to the daughter of his friend! It is enough to drive a man crazy!» Then he told them briefly how Galip Bey had treated

him and his wife. «But where is he now? Did you say you have captured him? Will I see him?»

There was no need for them to answer. From behind the door came Baxhuli's thick voice:

«Can't you walk straight? Come on, move!»

Through the doorway appeared, first, the black hat and the big head of Galip Bey. Then the rest of his fat body dressed in a black suit all crumpled and covered with dust. Next to him and tied hand to hand with him came another man, tall, rather thin, wearing the shirt and trousers of an officer's uniform. He wore no hat and no ranks and held his head lowered, so that only his ruffled brown hair could be seen.

«Move more lively, do you hear what I say?» was scolding Baxhuli. «Look at him! Complaining that he has been walking three hours and has slept on the bare ground. Complaining to me, who has been walking all my life and never slept in a bed!»

The bey was nodding his head in a conciliatory way.

— You are right, my son. And I wouldn't be complaining if I had your age. When I was young I could chew iron bars; I was the terror of the Italians in the war of Vlora and later against the beys with Avni Rustemi... Yes, you are right to be impatient because you are young and don't know the drawbacks of old age. It was my age that brought me to the state in which you see me now.»

Baxhuli was regarding him with scornful annoyance.

«Come, on, come on! They aren't younger than you, the fathers of our comrades who have come with their boys to share our life here and I have never heard any of them complain like you.» And he mentioned the names of some of the older leaders of the partisan movement.

«But they are different, my son. Who hasn't heard

about them? I admire them. They are the hope of the nation!» Galip Bey was speaking in a plaintive voice trying to win over Baxhuli's sympathy.

He continued in that tone for some time, but Baxhuli did not seem to be listening, his attention being turned to the officer, who was looking sideways at the fat man as if he would like to strangle him with his own hands.

«And you, mister, why do you look so angry?» asked Baxhuli passing by his side.

The officer stared at him with a bitter smile.

«Please, hurry up and take us where you must take us, because I can't stand any longer the babbling of this villain.»

Baxhuli was astonished; he would have said something but Galip Bey gave him no chance. He turned his big body towards the officer and with his free right caught him by the collar of the shirt:

«What did you say? Repeat it?!»

«A villain! That's what you are!» shouted the officer maddened and struck him with his left fist. It caught the bey full on the chin, his hat flew several meters away, his head swung backward, then forward, his knees bent all by themselves and he crumpled on the ground dragging the officer with him.

«Look what you have done now!» said Baxhuli and began to help them get to their feet.

The group with the commissar approached, Rexha nudging Piciruku and laughing. Ferik, on the contrary, seemed shocked by the scene and was watching it with disgust.

Only when the two arrested men were back on their feet and Galip Bey had recovered his crumpled hat, Ferik turned aside and murmured:

«How fat he has grown, the dog!»

## CHAPTER VI

In the roofless room, where a rickety table was placed by the fireplace together with three wooden boxes that served as chairs, the scene was set for a short inquest. It was presided by commissar Toja with Rexha on his right and Ferik on his left.

Facing them about a meter from the table were standing the two defendants with Baxhuli and another partisan a step behind them. Piciruku was sitting on a log a little apart from the others, holding on his knees a small leather case, like the ones used by photographers, pretending to be taking notes, but the sheet of paper on it remained blank. On the opposite side of the fireplace was lying the messenger Veli for whom a couch had been improvised on the floor. He was wearing a peasant's shirt and a partisan's jacket. Three other partisans were sitting on the floor beside him.

Galip Bey was the first to be questioned.

«Have you anything new to tell us?» asked the commissar. «We want only facts, no introduction and no evasive talk.»

The bey took a step forward, as if to hear better, then he took off his hat, crushed it with his both hands over his chest and spoke in a quite clear voice:

«No, last night I told you all I had to tell. I am an honest man. I would only like to add that I was surprised at the decent way you treated me. You have won me over completely. I thank the National Liberation Movement for it.»

«You told us you were going to Lushnja on a private business.» the commissar asked.

«Yes, private. For some cattle stolen by those Ballist dogs.»

The officer raised his hand to his eyes and muttered something. His face was extremely pale.

«And you, do you have anything to say?» the commissar addressed him.

«Yes, I do,» he pushed back his hair from his forehead, swayed slightly from right to left and back again, gave the bey a sidelong glance and said: «I have been reflecting, mister commissar, and have come to the conclusion that the human being is the dirtiest animal on earth.»

The commissar frowned.

«You can keep that philosophy to yourself, my 'good fellow', to us, man is the most precious capital.»

«I did not have in mind your men, mister commissar, please, I was speaking about my associates, about this swine here, whom until yesterday I honoured and respected as my superior and only now discovered what he really is. You must not believe what he says. He is the lowest liar of all.»

Galip Bey turned to him maddened, covering him with invectives and reaching to stop his mouth, but the officer pushed his hand aside with disgust. Baxhuli stepped forward and stood between them.

«I am going to tell you everything,» continued the officer, while Galip Bey tried to put in order his jacket and the hat. «Yes, I will tell you...» He suddenly stopped, looked towards the window and stood silent beating his lips.

«Come on, speak,» urged him the commissar, while the eyes of all the others were watching the officer expectly.

«Yes, I will tell you things of great interest to you though to me it means to betray my ideals.»



There was a general stir in the room: Piciruku coughed. Baxhuli refrained with difficulty from laughing, tightening his jaws. The messenger Veli, still weak from his illness, shook his head and smiled to the comrades around him. The commissar, Rexha and Ferik also looked at each other amused.

«You can despise my opinions,» went on the officer with a bitter smile, «but I insist that you must hear me. And I assure you that on my part it is neither arrogance nor weakness, for I have nothing to gain from either. It may seem an affectation, but I declare frankly that, whatever your verdict would be, I will accept it and will by no means ask you to spare my life. By no means! I am Petrit Kasimati, an officer of the Albanian nationalist army, and I will die as such, though in your jargon you may call me a quisling.»

As if awakening from sleep, Galip Bey turned his head and stared at him.

«You say this isn't arrogance?» asked the commissar tapping with his pencil on the table to stop Piciruku from intervening.

«No, mister commissar, it is no arrogance. On the contrary, it is the only attitude dictated to me by the road I have chosen for myself. Right or wrong, it is my road, and I intend to stick to it like many of my comrades who have given their lives for it.»

Rexha raised his hand and asked permission to speak.

«Can you tell us who benefits from you comrades' sacrifice?»

The officer stood silent for a moment with his eyes half closed and his head held high.

«It depends on the way you look at it, cousin,» he replied.

«Relative? Drop the philosophy! Tell us rather in whose interest does the Balli Kombëtar fight! Can you tell us that?»

«Yes, I will tell it as I understand it. But, first, I would like to point out that we, too, have our ideals and are fighting for them with all our heart, and that your tracts are wrong when they say that in every clash with the partisans the ballists run away with their tails between their legs. Only now I realize with regret that among our leaders we have people like this gentlemen here.» The officer pointed his finger at Galip Bey without looking at him. «To save his life, he is ready to betray the memory of the fine boys who spilled their blood in defence of their ideals. Yes, gentlemen, their ideals!... I have never lost faith in our ideal. You may consider them wrong..., that is your conviction... We also consider your ideals wrong. Time will show it. But I insist that we have our ideals and are ready to give our lives for them. As for who benefits from our struggle, that also is clear to me: we are fighting for our nationalistic ideas and against those of the communists which aim at the destruction of the Nation, the family and private property. But fortunately enough in our struggle we were supported yesterday by Italian fascism and today by German nazism which, as you know, are also opposed to communism. You call it treason, but if it comes to that, you also use foreign aid to defend your ideals.

«What is he talking about?» thought Ferik. «And why does the commissar let him chatter so much? He is good at it, the devil! One would think he has finished a hundred schools. Of course it is with this kind of propaganda that the ruffians succeed in winning over the poor devils who follow them and who have no reason for linking their fate with satraps like Galip Bey.»

Again he looked at the officer who seemed to have nothing else to say, but this time his face appeared to Ferik like the face of a hardened criminal. Ferik was wondering that a man with superior education could be so cruelly blood-thirsty and he would have

liked the commissar to question the officer more concretely about the crimes he had committed.

The commissar raised his head and asked the defendant:

«Did you say you were fighting against communism?»

«Yes.»

«Where were you on the 7th of April 1939?»

The officer closed his eyes as if to concentrate his thoughts, but his face showed signs of apprehension.

«Don't you remember?» the commissar urged him.

«I remember, of course. I was abroad, in Italy.»

«And what did you do the day, when fascist Italy attacked your country?»

«I don't remember exactly, mister commissar, but I am sure that my country's fate did not depend on the way I reacted.»

«I am asking what was your personal attitude, that is what I want you to answer, and nothing else.»

«Personally I behaved as my seniors did, Koculi, Këlcyra, and above all my father, Hajdar Bey Kasimati, who has done a great deal for Albania. I was convinced they were good nationalists.»

«Very well! Against whom did Koculi and company come after the bayonets of the Italian fascists?»

«Against King Zog.»

«Are you sure? Zog, as far as I know, was more opposed to communism than you. What made you go against him?»

«That is a different matter, mister commissar.»

«No, it isn't different at all. But you are trying to evade the question because a straightforward answer will disclose the true anti-national aims of the Balli Kombëtar and yours personally. How do you explain the fact that the Albanian communists, from inside the country and from abroad, whom you consider anti-national, were ready on that black day of the 7th

of April to join hands even with the tyrant Zog if he had accepted to fight the foreign aggressor? You, who call yourselves 'defenders of the national cause', accepted to join the invader and fight the people who, although abandoned and betrayed by the king, did not hesitate to come out with knives and axes to face the enemy tanks.»

The officer remained silent. Ferik rubbed his hands with satisfaction. He thought the commissar was admirable.

«Did you take part in the Italo-Greek war?» asked the commissar after a pause.

«Yes. I was given the command of a battalion but it melted away almost as soon as it was formed, because most of the soldiers deserted.»

Piciruku could not refrain from laughing.

«How well he understands it, the poor fellow,» he remarked and would have continued, but the commissar stopped him.

«Was it your struggle against communism that took you to Greece? Were you afraid that Metaxas would betray your nationalist ideals?»

«No, mister commissar, it was against Greece that we fought and it was to defend the interest of our country in Kasova and Çamëria...»

Now the officer spoke in short phrases, taking his time to reflect. He mentioned the names of some well-known patriots of the past who had rightly claimed Kosova and Çamëria as inseparable parts of Albania. That, in his words, accounted for the wide gulf that divided the communists from the nationalists. That was a conviction which he shared with Mithat Frashëri, «with that man who, notwithstanding the communist propaganda against him, had always been and was still the purest model of Albanian nationalism.»

«Are you sure of Mithat Frashëri's sincere devotion to the nationalist cause?»

«I have no doubt about that.»

«Including the question of Kosova and Çamëria?»

«Naturally...» The officer pursed his lips to show his astonishment to the questions the commissar was asking.

«And what if I show you documents proving that he himself, your priceless Mithat Bey, is ready to barter away half of Albania to the foreigners, let us say to Greece provided that they help him to rule over the other half?»

«That is impossible,» replied the officer.

The commissar drew from his case a typewritten paper and handed it to him. It regarded a renounced nationalist personality captured by the National Liberation forces while attempting to cross the Greek frontier. Among the documents found on him was a letter written personally by Mithat Bey Frashëri, addressed to the North Epirus Greek committee. That letter was copied word for word in the typewritten paper together with Mithat Frashëri's signature. When the officer reached that part of the letter where Mithat Frashëri proposed to the chauvinists to occupy the principal centers of southern Albania, Korça and Gjirokastra, he glanced at the commissar, who was waiting patiently, supporting his chin on the palm of his hand, and with a dramatic gesture of despair returned the document without a word.

«Eh, what do you think of it?» asked the commissar calmly.

«It is unbelievable, mister commissar, frankly, I can't believe it is true..., however...» The officer covered his face with his hands, and with an altered voice, continued: «However, Mithat Bey must have gone out of his mind, only that would account for it.»

«Do you really think so? And what about that circular with his new instructions, very explicite indeed,

regarding the German and quisling operation in the south which we found on you? The circular was written and signed on the same day as that letter. Is it possible that Mithat Bey, 'that champion of Albanian patriotism', as you yourself just described him, could have been both insane and very reasonable at the same time?»

The officer did not reply. For a moment the whole room was silent. Ferik and Baxhuli exchanged a look of intelligence. Rexha and Piciruku were smiling contentedly. Only Galip Bey's face had grown blacker despite his satisfaction that the commissar had so cleverly put the officer in a tight corner.

«You said,» resumed the commissar, «that the communists, like the Balli Kombëtar and the Legaliteti, were prepared to make use of foreign arms to defend their ideals... I am sure you are only pretending to be so naive. Do you weigh with the same balance the high ideals of the communists and the low beastly aims of fascism?... It is true that the communists are ready to join hands with foreigners, but with whom? With all the peoples of the world who struggle for their liberation from the foreign yoke as from internal tyranny, from oppression and savage exploitation of **man by man**. We are against foreign occupation and subjection of the people and consider it immoral and shameful that a free nation should hold under subjection other nations. And yet you have the impertinence to criticize us for accepting as brothers in arms the negroes of Africa and America, the dockers of Marseilles, the farm serfs of Italy and the proletariat of Shanghai... Yes, we are also against private property, against property accumulated in the hands of the few who have exploited the sweat and blood of thousands of oppressed workers and peasants, we are against the property of the Rockefellers in America and Shefqet Verlaci here, or the property of that fat belly standing by your side. As for the family... You would do well

to rinse your mouth before you mention the communists' attitude towards the family. Or perhaps you would like us to adopt your notions of morality on these questions! No, no! We are decidedly against that kind of morality which allows the bey to decide according to his own interest whom the sons and daughters of his servants would marry. We consider infamous the morality of the big landowner who commits all sorts of debaucheries behind his wife's back and claims for his pleasure his girl servant or, worse still, when that servant runs away to save her honour, marries a man of her rank and tries to create a family, finds no peace from the persecution and revenge of her former master and his agents.»

The last words of the commissar roused the interest of the bey who until that moment had remained absorbed in his own thoughts and paid little attention to what was being said. He opened wide his eyes and stared at the commissar trying to read from his expression which landowner in particular he had in mind. But he saw no threatening sign on the commissar. Much more alarming appeared the face of the partisan sitting on the commissar's left who was listening like fascinated, with his eyes fixed on the commissar's face. Once he glanced at the bey and clenched his jaws. Their eyes met and that look pierced Galip Bey's heart like a dagger. The fat man lowered his eyes and dared not raise them again. He was disturbed: Why had that partisan looked at him with such hatred? It was the same look that his former servant had thrown him a long time ago by the olive oil press at Frakulla. He had got angry with that foolish servant, for a reason of no importance, but the matter had gone so far that he had felt obliged to give a lesson to the servant and an example to the others. He had struck the servant with an iron rod on the forehead. The young man had fallen senseless on the ground with the blood gushing from the wound. Galip Bey had not moved to

aid him and had not allowed the others to approach him. Then, when the servant had finally regained his senses, he had given the bey a look which had left him speechless! Yes, Galip Bey remembered the incident quite vividly.

«How long ago did that happen? Ten... twelve years? Who the devil remembers? And why did it come back to me just now? Can there be a link between the two incidents? Galip Bey attempted another glance at the partisan. His hand supporting his chin and his eyes on the commissar, Ferik was smiling, but again Galip Bey recognized the smile that servant had given him ten... or was it twelve years ago, when that servant had been ordered to come and apologize for what had happened?

Galip Bey withdrew his eyes from the partisan and tried to regain his composure but he could not control the involuntary movements of his hands which were trembling incessantly, rubbing his forehead, pointing at something invisible. Baxhuli observing his movements touched his elbow and motioned him to stay quiet.

«Calm down, you old fool; why are you wriggling all the time?» he whispered to the bey. For a moment the bey stood quiet, then he bent his head towards Baxhuli and asked:

«That partisan, the one sitting on the left of the commissar, could you tell me his name?»

The question was meant to be a whisper, but Galip Bey had lost control of his voice and it was heard by everybody.

«The man must be crazy,» laughed Baxhuli.

«What is wrong?» the commissar asked Ferik who whispered something to him, then got to his feet and said aloud:

«He is anxious about me... It's me, bey, it's me Ferik Talo, the onetime servant of the bey of Fra-kulla. Why should you worry? You ought to be glad.



For twelve years you have been looking for me, now you have found me, here I am.»

It came to the bey as if lightning had struck him. He remembered what he had told the commissar and Rexha the day before about his kind treatment of his servants and peasants, mentioning, in particular Ferik Talo whom he said he had brought up as his own son. He had mentioned Ferik because he had been assured that Ferik was dead, buried and he never expected to see him again. And now there he was, one of the three judges that were going to decide his fate.

His head hung dejectedly, his knees weakened and his big body seemed to shrink like a punctured bladder. Baxhuli caught him with both his hands by the shoulders and shook him until he brought him to his senses. The bey opened his eyes, wiped his face with the palm of his hand, regained some of his self-control and began to justify himself to Ferik.

«I have been looking for you, my son. Yes, I have. I knew I had done you wrong and wanted to make it up. God knows it wasn't my fault. It was my mother who, out of spite, had made the whole thing up. I found out the truth but I was too late. Now it is up to you and God to decide.»

The officer, wounded in his pride, was watching the scene sullenly. Only when the bey stopped talking, he hissed through his clenched teeth:

«You, dirty low coward!» and stood silent again.

The bey turned to him with a shower of words:

«You can bark as much as you like, do you hear me? You can do nothing to me. These brave men here are not so naive as to believe you. They may as well know what you are driving at by trying to put the blame on me.» He paused a moment, took a deep breath and, as if going to reveal something important, said loudly to the commissar:

«He is a German agent, mister commissar, all German, a German spy. But he is so sour at me for

quite another reason. He wanted to marry my niece but I didn't agree, knowing him for what he is. He is one of those men who want a new woman every night. Speak, can you deny it?» he turned to the officer. «Isn't you who took that yellow-haired whore of Eqrem Banka to hotel «Dajti?»

\*  
\* \*

The officer, when at last he was given the chance, explained that indeed he had wanted to marry «that scoundrel's» niece, a girl named Emira Velo, to whom he had been engaged since their childhood, but the matter had nothing to do with her uncle. She was an educated girl, with liberal ideas, a girl who did not let others decide for her. Besides, she had her parents, her mother and her brother, so that her uncle had no say in the matter.

Several of the men in the room laughed.

«It is as I say, mister commissar, I assure you. I have no reason to hide the truth. I can also add something that the bey doesn't know. I have given up that marriage, not because I wanted to but because the girl refused me flatly ...»

«Why did she do it?» asked the commissar.

«For political reasons. She has recently gone over to the social-democrats and, as you may know, I don't have anything in common with them. I am telling you that in all sincerity.»

«That sounds interesting,» said the commissar somewhat ironically, but the words of the officer had attracted his attention. «Could you tell us what these so-called social-democrats represent?»

«Sure ... They are the worst hypocrites on earth. I suspect that this man, here, my former superior, is also one of them. But it won't do him any good. None of his dirty tricks can help him now. I can give you

a full account of his activities as one of the leaders of the Balli Kombëtar who has placed himself entirely at the Germans' ... disposal.

Galip Bey, perspiration dripping from his chin, made several attempts to interrupt the officer, but Baxhuli jerked him by the hem of the jacket, reminding him that he was to keep quiet else ...

The bey looked with exasperated appeal at Baxhuli, as if to say: «Have pity. Don't you see what he is doing to me?»

«With the Germans? Yes. I have collaborated with them.» The officer admitted. «I am not 'all Garman' as the bey put it, because I did not like their scornful ways with the Albanians. But I have fought by their side, mister commissar, and I have participated in their operations, burning down villages, and even killing when I was ordered to do it, that I won't deny. I have obeyed the orders of my superiors because I was convinced that they were issued by serious men. If that conviction of mine was wrong, I am willing to pay for it. As for my moral conduct, this gentleman here is talking nonsense. Eqrem Banka's wife, whom he just mentioned, is a so-called emancipated woman whom her husband takes regularly to hotel «Dajti» and presents her to all sorts of people, not only Albanians but also Germans. Lately he has given her full freedom ... That is how this matter stands, gentlemen... Allow me just to repeat what I said earlier and to convince you that the guilty, in the sense you give the word, is Galip Bey Frakulla, the man you have here before you. Ask him to tell you about a certain meeting that has taken place the day before yesterday at «Continental» Hotel with the German Major Ficht, if you want to know the role he played in it. He can deny it, but you ought to be able to find out for yourselves. In that big hat of his, which he is so careful not to lose, he is hiding a thing which the partisans who searched

him did not find. Perhaps it will explain many things that interest you.»

At these words the bey paled. He made no attempt to speak or move but kept his eyes fixed on the officer's face.

The commissar looked at his watch, ordered a break and drew apart with his two comrades. Even then the bey did not move. Only when Baxhuli snatched his hat from his hands, and began to tie his hands he winked several times helplessly and began to wail:

«Where are you taking me to? What are you going to do to me? Please! Mister Ferik!»

«The low coward!» hissed the officer as he gave his hand to the other partisan to be tied.

## 2

Ferik's thick fingers felt in the inside of the band of Galip Bey's hat a thin piece of paper folded several times and hidden so well that he needed several minutes to detach it.

He pulled it out carefully, saw the words «top secret» on it and handed it to the commissar. It was a letter full of praises and thanks that the Minister of Internal Affairs Xhafer Deva had sent in March to Galip Bey in complimenting him for «the truly patriotic duty» carried out a month ago in mopping up the Lushnja zone from communist elements. Mr. Deva was expressing his disappointment at some so-called patriots who had denounced Galip Bey for not sparing the women and children in his operation... «All that I want,» explained the minister, «is to establish law and order, and you have fully succe-

eded in that.» The quisling minister indicated further that this way of dealing with the communists had been highly appreciated by the German kommandature which encouraged the bey to persist in his patriotic activity which he, the minister, together with the kommandature, valued as a «brilliant example of unflinching determination.»

The letter was typewritten, but under the signature the bey had added in his own handwriting the following words: «Now my adversaries, who are terribly scared of the communists, can go and hang themselves. They can do nothing to me! I am Galip Bey Frakulla!»



The officer, called in later to give some details concerning the letter, explained that Galip Bey had bragged about that letter at the meeting in «Continental» Hotel. Major Ficht of the Gestapo, who was presiding, had asked the letter to be translated, had listened with satisfaction, adding that he had been informed about the matter.

«Major Ficht is one of those unsmiling Germans,» continued Petrit Kasimati, «but when they told him what Galip Bey had written at the bottom of the letter, he had burst out laughing, patted the bey on the back and said 'sehr gut', which was unusual of him. The bey always carried the letter with him. Yesterday, when the partisans ambushed us at Ndroq, he had it in his pocket-book. When he realized the danger, he hurried to hide it in a secret place. I told him to destroy it, but he said: 'No, no! I may still need it'. Then it was all over and I had no chance to insist. The partisans opened fire, I came out at the other side of the car, took position and fired back. But the bey...»

«Was that why you quarrelled?» asked the commissar.

«Yes, that was the main reason. I was disgusted to see my comrade-in-arms, my leader, as he was raising his hands up at a time when I was prepared to give my life for him... He may have the excuse of his age for that part of it, but when I heard this representative of Albanian nationalism shout 'Long live the Communist Party!' it was too much for me.» the officer took a deep breath and after a short pause continued. «Later, after the preliminary interrogation, when you left us together, the bey asked me to pretend to know nothing about his activity. When I asked him why, he said: 'Well, you see, you have no hope to save your life since you fired at the partisans, whereas I behaved with moderation... Besides, you have no wife or children to mourn for you. As for your old man (he meant my father), he is sitting pretty and is sure to pass his remaining years in comfort, whatever the outcome of the events will be... Such is the man whom I had trusted blindly. That is what made me act against my character and give away my former comrade. But, as I said before, I am not doing it to save my life. I knew perfectly well what is in store for me. Now I have finished and it will be useless for you to ask me for any further information...»

The officer was exhausted. He felt weak and his face became wet with cold sweat. He made an effort to stand firm. Then the commissar ordered the guards to take him away and let him rest.

\*  
\*   \*  
\*

The guards brought in Galip Bey who staggered in as if he was pulling a cartload of stones. With his hands tied together over his protruding belly and his

shoulders sloping, he was jerking his head right and left like a man looking for invisible objects in the darkness. He felt in the unfamiliar surroundings. Only when he saw Ferik, with his arms crossed over his chest, looking at him with his cold dispassionate eyes, the bey seemed to awaken, straightened up his body and tried to take an attitude of repentance.

«Eh, Ferik, Ferik,» he sighed. «If you only knew how my house darkened after you left us! Well, such was the destiny of that house, but I, what a fool I have been ...» he raised his hands and ran them over his face.

Baxhul blew his nose trying to repress his laughter. The commissar looked aside uncomfortably. Rexha was staring at the bey with astonishment, while Ferik, scowling and red in the face, was glancing impatiently at the commissar as if to say: «Will you do away with that fool or will you let me do it?» But the commissar, as if on purpose, continued to smile to himself and did not raise his head.

«What a fool I have been to believe the lies of that old witch, my mother, who stirred up the whole trouble and then made me divorce my wife and abandon my son ... Later I tried to repair the damage I had done ... Better late than never, as the saying goes ... I did, I assure you... And how have you fared? How is Nekije, poor girl?»

Ferik could stand it no longer. He raised his hand asking permission to speak, and he saw from the commissar's face that he must not lose his temper, so he replied to the bey with words that came out as if pulled by force.

«Did you ask about Nekije? She is all right. She often remembers you.»

«So, she does? Of course, my boy. God knows that I brought her up as my daughter ... It was all my mother's fault ...»

The commissar interrupted him:

«That will do, now! Those are questions that you can settle later with those whom they concern. Here we have brought you to answer for other matters, particularly for your relations with the Germans. What can you tell us about that?»

«Much, mister commissar. I will tell you everything. I beg your pardon for not doing it earlier but I had my reasons. I found myself among people I did not know and feared that my depositions could be interpreted wrongly. But now thank God, I see among you a man who knows me well. Ferik has been like a son to me and in his presence I can speak without fear. I was playing false with the Germans, God is my witness. That letter, too, has a particular significance . . . You know what a criminal Xhafer Deva is. . .»

The comrades regarded each other perplexed.

«Will you cut it short?!» — threatened the commissar.

«Yes sir! I am coming to the essential part at once.»

«Very well. But be quick about it and stop beating about the bush. I warn you, the more straightforward your story, the better it is for you. You see what I mean? That letter and the remark you have written yourself are enough to condemn you to twenty deaths. So it is not a question of justifying, for your guilt is enough to fill rivers and lakes, but to tell us everything you know about the plans and actions of your friends. You are not a fool and you know perfectly well what we expect from you. This is your last opportunity to alleviate your punishment . . .»

Ferik nodded his head in sign of approval. At that moment a short spurt of automatic-gun shots was heard from outside. Galip Bey felt a long shiver run down his spine and shut his eyes instinctively.

«Or maybe you prefer to follow the example of your friend, the officer?» added the commissar. «It is







## PART SIX



## CHAPTER I

### I

*Down with the Red Terror!*

Galip Bey Frakulla, a model of Albanian nationalism has heroically fallen in accomplishing his duty. Uncertain the fate of his adjutant Kasimati.

With these headlines in big black print, Balli Kombëtar announced in a special tract, framed in mourning black, the irreparable loss.

The tract described in detail the «tortures» to which the communists had subjected the nationalist heroes. The most cruel tortures had been reserved to Galip Bey, *«that true stalwart; that worthy descendant of Scanderbeg, that pure-hearted hero who, even when the communist brutes had plucked out his eyes and cut off his tongue, had not flinched and had not given away anything, but had closed his eyes and shouted: 'Long live Albanian nationalism! Down with Red terror!'»*

The editor of the tract, it seemed, had written the announcement with his eyes full of tears and had not

taken into account that Galip Bey could not have shouted: 'Long live Albanian nationalism!' with his tongue cut off. The absurdity, however, was noticed later, since in the first moment the readers, shocked by the fate of the «heroes», paid little attention to details.

For captain Kasimati the tract had not given up every hope, since he was a clever man and could very well have given the communists the slip and saved his life.

The news had spread quickly. The tract, in the illegal way often adopted by the Balli Kombëtar «towards the German vigilance», was posted on walls and telephone poles or thrust under the doors of houses and offices and even on the walls of the newly built block-house in front of the Kommandature.

2

The house of Ajë Velu the lawyer was in deep mourning. People came and went, expressing their condolence to Mrs. Naime, with long faces sharing her sorrow and describing the loss of her brother as the loss of a priceless man who belonged not only to his family but to the entire nation. Mrs. Naime thanked them, wiping her tears with the corner of her black veil. Ajë was holding a handkerchief over his lips and did not speak even when the visitors mentioned the «crimes of the communists which had outreached all conceivable limits».

More moderate in manner and speech were Afiz Turhani and the lawyer, Mr. Meçe, who paid them a visit on the second day. Afiz said that the death was a case of God's inscrutable ways. He made no mention of Galip Bey's merits or his shortcomings but tried, in his

unpolished way, to bring some cheerful notes into the atmosphere of sorrow prevailing in the Velo family. And he succeeded so well that Mrs. Naime, the principal mourner, wiped away her tears and cried no more. It also relieved Ajeta, who was more concerned about his mother's sorrow than about his uncle's death. Thanking first Afiz Turhani, he then added that, according to some fresh information his uncle had received, Galip Bey's murder was only the beginning, that the communists had prepared a long list of names from among the more notable nationalists and social-democrats who were to be executed on one way or another. Ajeta was particularly upset because his own name was included in that list, although he was sure he had never attacked the communists so much as to deserve the extreme punishment. «I have only backed my personal point of view, that's all . . .». He repeated this phrase continuously and asked the others: «What do you think of it?» He was also worried about many of his friends like Hajdar Bey, Mr. Meçe and others whose names were in that list. He avoided expressing a definite opinion only adding «the owner of the house knows where his roof is leaking.»

«Are you speaking in earnest,» asked Mr. Meçe and seemed so shaken that he attracted the Afiz's attention.

Ajeta shrugged his shoulders and replied evasively, saying that he did not believe Mr. Meçe was in the list, though there were rumours to the contrary.

«I don't understand it,» said Meçe distressed, «What have I done to the communists?»

«I don't really know,» replied Ajeta and brought his chair closer to his friend so as not to be overheard by his mother. «The whole trouble, as I see it, started at that meeting in which we expected to get into touch with the representative of the National Liberation Front.»

«What makes you think so?» asked Meçe.

«Circumstantial evidence. You are yourself a man

of the law. The list comprises the names of those present at the meeting with the sole exception of Afiz Efendi, who is known as sympathizer of the National Liberation, and Emira, who must have been left out for some sentimental reasons.»

«Sentimental reasons!» muttered Mr. Meçe putting his hand over his forehead as if trying to keep his thoughts from straying.

Afiz Turhani shook his head doubtfully.

«You don't believe it, either?» asked him Ajet.

«No. I think this is all nonsense. The communists don't kill people who haven't filled their cup to overflowing. And I assure you that the meeting at your house has nothing to do with it. If you have done something wrong, you ought to know what it is . . .»

Afiz Turhan glanced at Mrs. Naime with the corner of his eyes and, seeing that she had dozed off paying no attention to them, continued bringing his head closer to Ajet.

It was all the fault of that swine, your uncle; you can be sure about that. The communists must have promised to spare his life, and he has emptied the sack.»

Ajet drew back his head as from too hot a stove.

«What do you mean, Afiz Efendi?» he exclaimed and, without waiting for an answer, reached for a tract lying on the small crystal table by his side and shook it in front of the Afiz's eyes. And this? Have you not seen what it says?»

The Afiz's loud laughter startled Mrs. Naime, who opened her eyes, coughed to conceal her embarrassment and went out, while Mr. Meçe, whose chain of thoughts had also been interrupted, began to listen to the Afiz with more interest. The Afiz stopped laughing and turned to Ajet:

«I am sorry, mister lawyer, but you know I am not good at etiquette and polished speech . . . You are an ass and a foolish one if you take seriously these tracts



of the Ballists. Even if I, and you too, saw with our own eyes Galip Bey doing anything heroic, we would not believe that stuff written the other day by Eqrem Banka in his office in consultation with Mithat Bey? Or perhaps you feel obliged to pretend for the sake of conventional decency. In that case, do it with others, not with me who know the Ballist better than they know themselves».

«Strange,» Ajeta pursued up his lips. «My sister and I were not of that opinion.»

«Miss Emira?» said the Afiz more gently. «She is made of a different stuff. Where is she, by the way? Why don't we hear her voice any more?»

«She hasn't been well lately.»

«That's too bad. What is the matter with her?»

«I don't know. She has a nervous exhaustion, it appears. She has had a kind of crisis and ...»

«Let us not change the subject, please,» Mr. Meçe interrupted him. «I am rather worried about the question raised by Mr. Ajeta.»

«The Afiz gave him a sidelong look.»

«That list, you mean? ... I thought you were a courageous man, coming, as you do, from a region renowned for bravery. Now I see that you are scared to the marrow of your bones.»

«It was not that I was thinking of, please.»

«What is it then?»

Mr. Meçe tried to explain that the meeting at the Velo house had caused all the trouble, because the communists had long ago discovered their true intentions. This was obvious because instead of a representative they had sent a tract with a long comment disclosing all the cards the social democrats had up their sleeves.

«And you may well ask,» went on Mr. Meçe, «how they managed to find out our secrets? And the answer to that question is another pair of shoes: Who

could have informed them if not one of the participants at that meeting?»

Afiz Turhani raised his head and frowned at the lawyer.

«You mean you don't believe that all the information given to those of the National Liberation came from Galip Bey in his attempt to save his life? Then go on and say outright that it was I, Afiz Turhani, who, as an intimate man of the communists, gave them all the information about that damned meeting.»

«Please, Afiz efendi, I have respect for you,» cried Meçe.

«If you have any respect for me, then you ought to listen to what I say. I am telling you frankly that both you, the social democrats, and those gentlemen of Balli, will do better to openly declare that you are body and soul with the Germans, or else surrender completely to the partisans. Your stale tricks can no longer deceive anybody. I am a trickster myself, but I see that it doesn't pay.»

«Your alternatives are too difficult, Afiz Efendi, blurted Mr. Meçe.

«Difficult, but you have no other choice.»

Afiz stirred in his seat, bent his body towards Meçe, lowered his voice and continued:

«I don't see what you can lose by dispersing like rain drops and join the National Liberation movement. You can easily find each other again and disintegrate it from the inside. Am I wrong?»

The lawyer Meçe shook his head perplexed.



Afiz Turhani, excited by his own words, had fixed his eyes on the two lawyers, who were also staring at him, and none of them had noticed Emira coming in. Her arms crossed and her hair ruffled, she was stand-

ing by the door listening to them with a scornful ironical look.

In the pause that followed the Afiz's last words, she freed her hands, cleared her throat and said «Good evening» in her cold impersonal voice.

Afiz Turhani was the first to recover from his surprise; he straightened his heavy body and got to his feet. Mr. Meçe could not but imitate him.

«Your uncle's death must have come as a shock to you,» said Afiz in a tone of condolence. «We also did not expect it and...»

«Why shouldn't you expect it? — Emira cut short his words. Had he deserved less than the others who were killed before him? True, he was my uncle, but I don't find necessary to ignore his faults. It was his despicable conduct and that of the others like him that disgraced the cause of the Balli organization and created a situation in which one is ashamed to call oneself a nationalist. The communists found their right target in killing him. But, with no intention of taking his defence, for after all he was not outstanding in culture and high principles, I can't deny his one merit: he followed the road he had chosen up to its bitter end. It doesn't matter if he was brave or a coward. It is enough that he paid for it with his life. And you?» she turned to the two lawyers. «What can you say about your conduct? You are fumbling clumsily this way and that, gossiping like bad women, and when they ask you who and what you are, you don't know what to answer... You are only capable of complaining about the communists, accusing them for killing people, as if the others aren't doing the same and even worse. The communists, at least from their point of view, are careful in choosing their victims, while the others are striking out blindly. Look at the people arrested and killed by the Germans on one side, and by Balli and Legality on the other. Who are those people? Their names aren't even worth mentioning. And among them

not a single communist of those who cause the real trouble, not one of them have they succeeded in capturing..."

The lawyers stunned with astonishment were staring at the girl who had never spoken to them with so much scorn and hatred.

"Listen to that now! Listen to that!" Afiz murmured with a curious smile and his eyes turned to his friends. "And they say that beauty, wisdom and courage don't go together. Here you have them, fused as it were in a golden crucible in the person of our dear Miss Emira. Sit down, my girl, sit down," he invited her by taking her hand which she immediately withdrew. "I am all on your side, I assure you."

"I did not mean you, Afiz Efendi," said the girl. "I mean these two here... But you also are surprising me. How can you be on my side when everybody knows that you are serving the communists?"

"What does this mean?" Ajet caught his head in both his hands. "Is this my sister Emira or am I dreaming?"

"Do you still doubt it?" said Meçe sarcastically. "She is your sister, all right, the modern girl with independent views. Why should you wonder?"

Afiz Turhani, anxious to keep his attitude of self-assurance, reached again to take Emira's hand.

"I understand you very well my girl, and I don't blame you. But, please, sit down here by my side and let us talk it over calmly. And I am sure to persuade you that Afiz Turhani, with this long beard of his, is not doing the job of the communists but finds himself in a tight corner not knowing which way to go."

As the girl refused to sit down but just turned to face him, Afiz got up himself, put his hand on her shoulder and began to whisper to her in a confidential manner.

"I know that the meeting at your house that day has disappointed and embittered you, in particular that

comment concerning Ajet. But I give you my word that I will find out who wrote it and make him be sorry for it.»

The girl brought her black eyebrows over her eyes and a line crossed her forehead as she asked half angry, half surprised.

«Why? What is wrong with him?»

Now she was even more convinced that Afiz Turhani was so intimate with the communists, that he knew who was the author of that letter. Not only that, but he must also have found out about her former relations with Qemal Orhanaj.

«This is a futile question,» smiled Afiz. — You know perfectly well that the hand which has written that comment belongs to no ordinary writer and that his pen is more deadly than a bullet. That is the reason why he must be surprised.

«It is funny,» said the girl removing his hand from her shoulder. «I have always regarded you as a communist and though I hate the communists, I respect them for their firmness in defending their views. And now I see that you can be anything and nothing.»

Exasperated by his sister's daring, Ajet jumped up to stop her mouth, but Afiz came between them.

«Wait a minute, please, the girl speaks with conviction and with authority of her own. She is not like so many of her sisters. Besides, she must have her reasons for behaving so rashly. Speak my girl, speak without fear.»

«I have already said all I had to say. I have nothing to add or retract.»

«No. This is not what I fear. Every accusation should be backed by arguments. Don't you think I am right, mister lawyer?»

Meçe agreed nodding his head, but Ajet was looking at his sister with hardly repressed irritation at the spiteful way she had treated his friends.

«You want arguments?!» she smiled provocatively

at Afiz Turhani. «I have been standing here long before you noticed me and I heard all you were saying to these gentlemen. I heard how you defended the National Liberation movement and was not surprised because I know for whom you are working. But why now did you change your attitude all of a sudden? Was it not because you want to collect material to report to the communists? Thank you very much...»

Afiz was given no opportunity to reply. The girl ran out slamming the door behind her.

The two lawyers looked at each other nonplussed. Could Afiz be double-dealing?

«Nonsense!» muttered Afiz Turhani, buttoning up his overcoat, getting ready to leave.

### 3

At the house of Hajdar Bey Kasimati the visits of condolence were also continuous. Luxury limousines and landaurs stopped in front of the wrought-iron gate, discharging their load of important personalities and glided noiselessly away.

Mithat Bey Frashëri, one of the first to arrive with his two civilian body-guards close behind him, entered taking off his bowler hat. He looked paler than usual and his grey eyes seemed shrunken under the mourning jacket with perfectly ironed striped trousers and black shining shoes. The guards stopped at the gate while he walked up the stairs holding his body upright and his head high expecting someone to come out and meet him. And indeed, though deeply distressed by the drama involving his son, Mr. Kasimati infringed the rules of etiquette and came out himself to meet his distinguished friend.

Mithat Bey bowed stiffly, muttered some words of condolence which Hajdar Bey did not hear distinctly, but just the same thanked him even before his guest had finished his speech.

Mithat Bey continued his condolences inside as he took his seat on a deep leather easy chair reserved only for exceptional visitors. He said he was profoundly moved by the tragic event, accompanying his words with frequent winking and spasmodic tightening of his lips. He said he hoped that captain Petrit was safe and well. He was convinced that the communists would not dare kill him, fearing the consequences of such a rash act and knowing that the fellow was the son of Hajdar Bey Kasimati who had the whole nation behind him.

Mr. Kasimati was touched by his friend's words and from time to time dabbed his eyes with his handkerchief, although nobody had ever seen tears in his eyes. «Thank you, thank you, you are very kind. Your words are balm to the wounds of the nationalists», he said.

«*Mais, c'est mon devoir, mon cher,*» said Mithat bey inciting Mr. Kasimati to reply also in French, of which he knew no more than ten or fifteen words which he invariably mixed up with Italian and, when hard to put to it, resorted to the more familiar Turkish.

They were in the middle of their conversation when Hajdar bey's wife came in wearing a transparent black veil that covered her head and the upper half of her body.

Thin and pale, but still preserving the clean cut features of a former beauty, though not yet forty, Mrs. Kasimati walked towards Mithat Bey who had risen to his feet and as bowing to her with his both hands extended to take hers. He rebuked her gently for wearing weeds without having any reliable information that some thing tragic had really happened to her son.

«*Ça ne va pas,*» he turned to Hajdar Bey with

a look of reproach. «Am I wrong, Enise Hanëm?» he went on addressing again Mrs. Kasimati who appeared confused by the exaggerated attention of the famous man.

Hajdar Bey found himself obliged to explain that his wife was in mourning not for their son but for Galip Bey who happened to be a relation of hers.

«Is that so?» wondered Mithat Bey shutting his eyes in an effort to recall something that had aroused his curiosity. «In that case how did you intend to arrange the marriage of your son to Emira Velo, whose mother is Galip Bey's sister?»

«Well, it is like this...» Mister Kasimati paused to think. «How can I put it? In my part of the country, marriages between cousins are not considered wrong. Besides, Enise Hanëm is my second wife while Petrit is my son from my first marriage.»

«This is interesting. I didn't know it. And your first wife, is she living?»

«No. She stayed in Albania, back in 1924, when I went in exile, and she died a few years later by Zog's persecutions. The news of her death came to me in Corfu where I had been sent by the Bashkimi i Kombit, on a political mission regarding some emigrated Albanians. There I met Enise Hanëm who had come there with her brothers for medical treatment. We got acquainted, fell in love and were married. She was beautiful, she came from a noble family and she had a handsome dowry. What more could I ask for? She had no education but, if it comes to that, education in a wife means only trouble for the husband.»

«C'est ça oui,» nodded Mithat Bey.

«Oui,» replied Mr. Kasimati laughing.

The lady excused herself and left them. Mithat bey again set down in the easy chair and started a conversation which was particularly to Mr. Kasimati's liking; it was about their struggle against the reds. His appeal to the nationalists, as the head of the Balli



Kombëtar, had found its target. With the exception of some leading personalities, mostly intellectuals, who were obliged to remain in the capital, all the others had responded to it. He had information that in many regions the reds were ill treated, that the population had turned against them, and this had given him the assurance that the communists would not resist. «This information, coming from the command of the Balli Kombëtar and the German Kommandature,» concluded Mithat Bey, «has convinced me that this time we will cross the stream without getting our feet wet.» These successes of the Balli, in his opinion, had embittered the communists who had started a terror of unprecedented cruelty. An example of it was the murder of Galip Bey, that «patriotic old man» with one foot in the grave. Worse examples come from the south where the communists, to save ammunition, burn with fire not only the nationalists and their families, but also all those who are unable to escape to the mountains... And the worst of all is that for all these they put the blame on the Ballists and the Germans... *C'est terrible, n'est ce pas?* But we shall come through,» concluded Mithat Bey.

«I had already told them, I had indeed. You can't trifle with the Germans.» Mr. Kasimati shook his head significantly. «But those fools, the social democrats, wouldn't believe me. And they all shouted at me when I got up at that meeting to tell Mr. Meçe and his friend Jovan Kauri what they were worth for. But they will find what they are looking for. I told my son everything that very day, and he is not one to endure their intrigues. He is sure to report everything to Major Ficht.»

Mithat Bey was listening with half-closed eyes, touching from time to time his starched collar which was rather tight.

«You are too impulsive, Hajdar Bey. I am telling you that *sans compliments, parole d'honneur!*», he said

patting Mr. Kasimati on the shoulder. «But you ought to be more careful. You are talking too freely about our links with the Germans, with Major Ficht, at a time when, to say it *entre nous*, we have all interest to throw the stone and hide the hand, *n'est ce pas?*»

«*Oui... Excluez moi... Moi... Mon fils...*» My son Petrit has more than one reason to square his accounts with Mr. Meçe.»

«I don't understand you,» frowned Mithat Bey.

«Let me explain, please. You are like a father to the nationalists and you must know everything. The lawyer Meçe is trying to take advantage of his friendship with Ajet Velo. He is at home in that house and, as I suspect, he is the main cause for spoiling my son's engagement to Emira, for which you yourself had the kindness to intervene, knowing that they were made for each other.»

«A clever girl,» muttered Mithat bey musingly. Then he turned to Mr. Kasimati, shook hands with him and said with a melancholic tone: «Let us hope Captain Petrit is safe and sound, all the rest will be put right in good time...»

«Thank you, thank you!!»

4

Two other cars stopped one after the other before the gate when Mithat bey was descending the stairs. Eqrem Banka and his wife, who came out of the first car, regretted that they did not come a few minutes earlier. They would have found Mithat bey in the house and that would have given them a great satisfaction, particularly to the lady who always referred to him as «The father of nationalism». However, an

encounter *en passant* was very welcome. In her trouble, she forgot her handbag in the car and told her husband to go and get it, while she entered the courtyard. Mithat Bey with the smile he reserved only to the ladies, raised his hat with a short movement indicating that he was in a hurry. But that did not deter the enterprising lady. She rushed at him with an extended hand, which the great man raised delicately to his lips and again made for the door, but Mrs. Banka caught his hand and began to flatter him with words and eyes:

«Why are you in such a hurry? It is too bad I did not come a little earlier... I wanted so much to meet you...»

Mithat bey, who had noticed that in the second car had come Major Jahja and a German officer, whispered to Mrs. Banka that this was not an appropriate moment for a long conversation...

«Why, what is wrong with it?» she said. «Are you concerned about Herr Ficht? He is a personal friend of mine. Intimate. Very intimate. He wouldn't dare... On the contrary, he will be delighted to meet you...»

The two officers were approaching Mr. Banka who had retrieved his wife's bag was also coming after them.

«Here comes Eqrem who speaks German,» she continued.

«You are exposing me, madame. You are giving the communists material to criticize us,» said Mithat Bey glancing to the right and to the left. But... he lowered his voice and tightened his hold on her delicate hand. «You are so nice that... that... that...»

He could not finish his compliment. Mrs. Banka caught his arm and with an enticing smile led him towards the officers.

«For a moment Mithat Bey took the attitude of a man absorbed in his thoughts. He delicately freed his arm from Mrs. Banka's hand and, leaving her no

time to make the presentations, addressed the German officer:

«*Guten Morgen, Herr Ficht.*»

«*Guten Morgen,*» replied the German glancing at his watch.

The cold manner of the German was not at all to Mithat Bey's liking.

«You haven't heard the latest news?» asked the major.

«The n... n... news?» Mithat Bey stuttered, without being able to say what he had intended to.

«The news, Herr Frashëri. The news from the south regarding your army,» the major raised his rasping voice. «You mean you haven't heard it?... Well, anyway, I can inform you that General Fitstun does not find it necessary to meet the representatives of the Balli at noon, as it was arranged previously.»

Neither Mr. Banka nor his wife understood what a heavy blow these words meant to Mithat Bey. Only he knew the significance of the postponement of that meeting with the German general Fitstun. But of course, he could not demonstrate his disappointment in the eyes of his admirers. That would not do...

*Danke schön, Her Ficht,*» blurted Mithat bey with a sepulchral voice.

«So you also know him?» asked Mrs. Banka after a short pause.

«Yes, I know him,» said Mithat Bey with an attempt to smile. But the wrinkles on his forehead showed that he was very much distressed.

## CHAPTER II

### 1

For some time now Zef and Alert had established themselves in the cabin known as house Nr. 5, Tinker's street, a hut with thin walls of reeds held together by a plaster of mud and lime and with a roof of old tin sheets. It was almost hidden among a group of two-storied house behind which rows of gardens separated by low hedges or wire fences were spreading as far as the banks of the Lana river. The two young men had established their links with the reorganized cells and with the other members of the District committee, doing their work quietly without arousing suspicion.

Alert was quite optimistic about the new cadres raised to higher ranks and often mentioned it to Zef, who, though satisfied with them, reserved his appreciation saying: «It is too early to judge them.»

That day they were greatly excited over some news they had received the day before directly from Comrade Hysein: at Përmet, under the fire of the German and quisling offensive countered successfully by the partisan brigades, was held and had completed its proceedings the First Anti-fascist National-Liberation Congress with delegates from all parts of Albania, which had taken a series of important resolutions regarding the future of the people. Particularly important to Zef and Alert was the list of comrades elected to the central organs of the future government. On the top of the list Hysein underlined the name of the well known leader of the Party, Comrade Enver Hoxha.

Alert unable to repress his joy, could not stop asking questions:

«Do you remember that night, last March, at the brickyard? And the instructions Comrade Hysen gave us when he left for the south? I never thought there was so much work to be done... I was so foolish as to insist to come out into illegality at that time... But we pulled through, all right, eh, didn't we?»

«Yes we did», Zef assented withholding with difficulty his laughter at the childish enthusiasm and the never ending questions of his comrade.

As soon as they received the news they prepared a plan for a wide propaganda work with tracts and detailed comments of the event that were to be distributed among the population of Tirana and the countryside. First they had to call a meeting of the leading cadres of the town and the villages and the army units which was to be held at the village of Gurra. They sent summons by special messengers stressing the «extraordinary» importance of the meeting without mentioning the issues that were to be discussed. It had been Alert's idea to keep the news as a surprise to be served at the beginning of the meeting, and Zef had not opposed it.

At Peza also things were going well and this was due not so much to the District committee as to the ability of the comrades of Peza themselves, who in Alert's words, «had ingeniously solved the question of the messenger» by replacing the wounded Veli with another messenger, a comrade who in many ways was as good as Veli. The information which had arrived that day and was completed by the new messenger, who had been an eye-witness of most of the events, had filled their hearts with joy. Now they had at their disposal a rich and valuable material for the party propaganda work which had to be utilized in the best possible ways. This was also stressed in the letter by Rexha who happened to be in Peza at that time. It was a pity that some of the best equipped technical bases, like that of Kopani, could no longer be used

and the few that still remained undiscovered had to work under great difficulties. Rexha had written that a printing press had been installed at the village of Gurra and that the comrades could print in it all the materials coming from Tirana, including volumes of books. But the place was too far from them and they could not communicate with it at a moment's notice, as it was often necessary when the smallest delay meant loss of interest in the news.

That morning Zef and Alert had sent Arta with instructions to investigate the possibility of resuming their work at mother Sadete's house. If not, she should try to arrange something with professor Filipi, who was regularly listening to the news broadcast by foreign radio stations and who had never had his name in the lists of the enemy. The suspicion his neighbour, the police sergeant had expressed some days before was not taken seriously, so that the professor's house could be considered a safe base. Finally if she had enough time to spare, Arta could inquire about the situation of two suspected families living in the New Tirana quarter but she must not be back later than at five o'clock, because that would mean that she had met with some accident.

But it was before half past four and too early for the comrades to worry about her. They went on discussing the news they had heard and the plans they were making, Alert was insisting that... «the District committee must be summoned... More actions must be organized... The Germans would not dare kill a hundred for one as they threatened» etc. Zef looked at him from time to time and smiled without raising his head from the pile of letters in front of him.

«What do you say? Shall we not do something about Mr. Kasimati? And Eqrem Banka and Major Jahja and so many others who have filled the cup?»

«No, Alert. It is not the time for such actions. With

them we risk much and gain little. We must be careful with our cadres...»

Zef did not notice the surprise his words had caused to Alert.

«I don't agree with you,» continued Alert raising his voice.

«Why don't you agree?» asked Zef, struck by the way Alert spoke.

Alert did not answer, but his pale face and reddened ears meant that he had much to say.

«Speak man, what are you driving at?» Zef incited him pushing aside the pile of letters.

«We must be careful with the cadres, all right,» began Alert looking aside and trying to give his voice a more friendly tone. «We must spare them but not to the extent of keeping them out of the war. This way of preserving the cadres has long been condemned by the Party... Don't you remember what Xhepi and Anastas Lula preached?... And the firebrands, the «zjarrists»?... You know perfectly well, comrade Zef, that at one time I also belonged to the «Zjarri» group. And although I have long closed my accounts with them, I still feel uneasy when their name is mentioned.»

Zef listened attentively, at first seriously, then with a smile in his half-closed eyes, which was a sign of doubt mixed with regret.

«Don't look at me like that but correct me if I am wrong, said Alert attempting a smile.

«Correct you? Oh, no! The way you treat the question means that you need no correction but that you demand an explanation. There is a misunderstanding here that must be put right. I am speaking about preserving the cadres, even if it means by keeping them away from direct danger, not in principle but in a particular situation and for a particular purpose. In other words, I think we must limit the sort of actions that endanger our cadres in order to attack the enemy



on another front, where we can cause him more damage and at the same time avoid the risk to our cadres whereas you treat the question in principle.... But, Comrade Alert, I am worried not about your criticism but about what you said of your past connections with the «Zjarri». How is it possible that after so many fire tests and the trust that the Party has put on you, after appointing you to the delicate post in the District committee you still feel uneasy for having belonged to that group? Your case doesn't seem simple to me. Even the criticism you address to me does not come from your heart, from the pure heart of a communist, but because you want to prove to me and to yourself that you stand on firm party principles. This you have proved with your work, with your complete devotion to the party cause in situations of great complexity and difficulty. The fact that you want to prove it to me in other ways, — and I have noticed it on other occasions but have not pointed it out, — does not impress me favourably. Why should you do it? Which of us, who are your comrades, has shown the slightest doubt in you? My dear Alert, you must drive these suspicions out of your mind, and then you will see yourself in quite a different light.»

Zef Moisiu was so convinced in what he was saying that one would think he had opened his comrade's heart and was reading from it. Alert could understand it very well by Zef's composed manner, by the kindness of his look, by his calm measured gestures and by his general attitude which left no place for suspicion in his sincerity. No, Zef had not pronounced all those words in his own defence. Never in the course of the twelve months they had worked together had Alert noticed any sign of insincerity in his comrade. On the contrary, not only towards Alert but towards all the comrades who knew him Zef had been a model of true bolshevik behaviour in everything, but particularly in questions of criticism and self-criticism. So

often had Alert heard him criticize the others or himself; there was something extraordinary in that man. He spoke not as if he had reflected on what he was saying but as if the words came out right from his heart even when they could aggravate his own case. And when some comrade tried to advance some attenuating argument, Zef would interrupt him: «No, comrade, it is not as you are trying to present it. That means to dilute wine with water. I have my personal faults in this matter, and any attempt to minimize them means that you do not stand on firm party positions and it leads to the weakening of the work the Party is doing with us. In such a case, what is the meaning of leading the life of a communist? Is there any sense in appearing always neat and clean? Who benefits from it? In such a case we would have been nothing more than defective cells in the organism of the Party...»

This had happened in April when the District Committee had met to discuss an error committed by Zef during the German blockade and general control of the capital. The Party had been notified that the control was going to take place and had warned all the cells to take the necessary measures. But it so happened that Zef, who was charged with an important part of that duty, was himself taken by surprise and succeeded in escaping only thanks to a lucky coincidence. This, undesirable incident, which could have seriously compromised the work of the Party, was admitted by Zef himself and though most of the members of the committee, including Alert, did not consider it a serious error, Zef insisted that the case should be discussed by the District Committee and serve as a lesson. Alert had been most impressed by Zef's conduct asking the discussion of the case. Instead of trying to find some justification Zef was doing his best to find and point out the weak sides of his error. That day Alert saw in practice what the true bolshevik spirit was and compared it with his former leaders of

the «Zjarri» group who would never admit an error in their work even when that error was obvious. It had been a master stroke on the part of «Zëri i Popullit» to expose in an article published in January 1943, the duplicity of the leaders of that group, which had given its members the opportunity to drop out of it and leave the two or three leaders to themselves to finish, as could be expected, as ordinary spies of the fascists.

Alert had often quarrelled with his former leaders and blamed himself for associating with such unreliable representatives of communism, but time and again they had offered evidence of being authorized by the Comintern, and there was little he could do about it. He did not know where to find the Comintern and complain. At that time Alert had often wished to see at the head of the «Zjarri» group sincere men, courageous, and firmly determined to fight for the liberation of the people and the country and for communism, men who were free from personal ambitions, intrigues and falsity, men different from those who pretended to be pure even though their hearts are full of filth.

It was more than twelve months since Alert had parted with them and was living and fighting together with people like those of whom he had dreamed before. People like Zef Moisiu, one of the best! «How can one fail to be open-hearted with men like him?» Alert asked himself. «How can one be discreet and conceal one's thoughts and feelings to Zef even if one knows they are wrong, when one is convinced that a comrade like Zef is always, ready to help you? And why should I try to hide anything from him, knowing that I have no wicked intentions and that the same fire of the communist ideal that is burning in my heart is also burning in his? No, it would be base on my part not to open my heart to him, particularly after what he has said and the way he said it.»

«I seem to have upset you,» said Zef apologetically when he saw that Alert was not speaking. «What do

you think. Perhaps I was wrong... Only the dead are never wrong.»

Alert leaned forward and looked Zef straight in the eyes. Zef returned the gaze. Alert's face has flushed a little and his eyes had lost their usual liveliness, but they were looking at Zef with grave sympathy and respect, which Zef had rarely noticed in him.

«You say you are perhaps wrong?». Alert spoke at last? «No, comrade Zef, you are not wrong at all. On the contrary, you have hit the nail right on the head. And I can do no more but repeat what you said, because it was the naked truth. It is not the first time that you mention the necessity of sparing the cadres in special circumstances, and my pretence of standing on Party principle was quite out of place. But I did it, I did it urged by an unhealthy impulse typical of those of the «Zjarri» group. I thought that you brought up that question with the purpose of testing me, trying to find if I still had any remnants of the view points of the «Zjarri» group. If I accepted your point of view, which I thought to me sounded very similar to that of the «Zjarrists», you would conclude that I have still preserved some traces of my best opinions, but if I opposed you, you would have a better opinion of me. That is why I opposed you? Now I am frank with you; I could not be more frank than this. And it did me a lot of good. Somehow I feel purified, like Dante felt in his Divine Comedy when he came out of the purgatory: 'puro e disposto per salire alle stelle' (pure and disposed to soar to the stars). Indeed, now I have completely got rid of that feeling of guilt which had made so much impression on you. I don't know if I am clear enough...»

«Very clear. I have no doubt about it,» said Zef often looking at his watch. «It is getting late, and Arta has not come yet.

«She isn't back,» said Alert absent-mindedly as he was arranging a package of documents in his pocket.

But the next moment he stared at Zef inquiringly and continued:

«Indeed she isn't back yet? What do you think of it? What could have happened to her?»

By the way Alert put the questions, Zef understood how deeply worried he was, but paused a little before answering.

«She must have some reason, for being late. She was expected to be back at five o'clock, and now it is half past five. What do you say? Shall we go away?»

«Yes, we must certainly go away,» said Alert somewhat irritated. «She knows this is no time for joking... Then we must not be late in the village. They expect us there at six o'clock. That is how it was arranged with Bimi.»

Zef seemed to be absorbed in his thoughts and was not listening.

«That is what I think,» concluded Alert.

«Yes, that is if...» — the altered face of Zef meant that he was deeply concerned about something and would like to talk about it, but preferred to keep quiet so as not to distress his comrade.

The two comrades came out and took the road through the gardens towards the Lana brook.

## 2

«As for Arta, here we have the Philosopher,» said Zef, «we can give him some instructions for her.»

Above them, among some bushes that formed a sort of hedge along the torrent, the Philosopher was picking green saplings for his yearling kid which was filling its mouth with the succulent leaves and chewing them, agitating its short tail with satisfaction.

As soon as he heard their steps, he looked towards them and ran to meet them pulling the kid behind him.

«You have changed your trade,» laughed Alert. «That basket with the horns of almonds had become too conspicuous at the coffee houses.»

Zef looked with curiosity at the small boy who had raised his hand to shade his eyes from the sun and was squinting at Alert

«Eh, what are you going to say?» asked Alert. «Have we any news?»

The Philosopher dropped his hand and replied as if on report:

«Nothing. Everything in order. Climb up that torrent without fear. There you will find two friends of mine who are keeping their eyes open, and farther up, where Lana makes a turning, you have comrade Bimi with a sack full of those big 'turtles'.»

He blew his cheeks and showed with his hands how big the hand grenades were.

«Let us go, then,» proposed Zef. «Thank you, kid, so long!»

He started up the path along the hedge, while Alert stopped to tell something to the Philosopher, who was listening attentively, with a face that was getting more and more serious.

After leaving Alert with a blurted «Death to fascism»! the boy waited until the two men disappeared behind the hill, then he threw away the armful of saplings he had gathered, pulled the kid by the rope and was lost among the gardens.

### 3

Nekije Talo raised her hands to her head when she saw her son coming back in the evening so pale

that you could not draw a drop of blood from him even if you pierced him with a knife.

He did not reply to her questions but threw himself on the sofa by the fireplace, burrowed his face in the pillow and burst into tears.

«Tell me what is the matter with you, my boy. Can't you tell your mammy what is ailing you? Are you ill? Has someone beaten you? Has anything worse happened? Tell me!» His mother begged of him.

At last the Philosopher succeeded in controlling his emotion and told his mother what had happened:

The Germans had arrested Arta, and the comrades did not know anything for certain, they only suspected. All that afternoon he had been searching for some news as Alert had instructed him, and he had learned it from Major Jahja's servant who had heard the major tell his wife that the Germans «had caught a whore together with her aged lover, one of those who listen to foreign radio broadcasts and give the news to the communists»... The major had repeated the news by telephone to many of his friends and had explained that from the first interrogation, the «young lady» and the «old gentleman» had fallen into contradiction with each other, so now it was easy for the Gestapo to untangle all the activity threads of the Party of the «reds».

«Poor girl!» cried Nekija instinctively, but when she saw that it did not sound right to the boy she changed the tone and said resolutely: «They will draw nothing from her, never!»

The boy shook his head bitterly:

«The comrades are still in the dark and I had no time to go to them myself. They are out of Tirana tonight.»

In the morning an old peasant entered the yard of the Talo house leading a donkey loaded with wood. On top of the load the old man had put a big basket covered with fern and cherry leaves.

Nekija, who was feeding the chickens at that time, saw the old man unloading the donkey in her yard.

«You are mistaken, uncle. The wood is not for us.» she cried to him.

«No, madam, I am not mistaken...» — replied the old man gravely. «The wood and the cherries have been ordered and paid for some time ago by your son. Isn't your son at home now?»

When he heard the familiar voice, the Philosopher kicked aside the cast and ran out to meet the old man.

«Hallo, Father Llani!» he shouted running. «What brings you here?»

«My friendly duty.» the old man winked significantly. «Here you have the basket of cherries I had promised...» And I wanted to tell you that I am not only your own friend but also your father's.»

«My father's?» cried the boy astonished.

«Yes, I am a friend of your father's.» The old man sat down on the pile of wood he had just unloaded, pulled out of his pocket his tobacco box and, rolling a cigarette, told them how he had known Ferik.

«I don't need to tell you the rest,» he concluded, «but as you see, I have found people who showed me the way to your house.»

Father Llani said he had no time to drink the «barley coffee» that Nekija wanted to offer him but got to his feet and went «on an urgent errand» the comrades had to run.

When the old man was out in the street, the Philo-



sopher, who had been watching him thoughtfully, said to his mother:

«You know what, mother? I think I will go with Father Llani.»

«Why? Where?»

«With him it will be easier to pass the roadblock. Then I can turn to the village of Shkoza where I am sure to find Alert. I have to tell them about Arta. You try to find Deko and learn something from him.»

He did not wait for his mother's answer but put on his rubber «opingas» and ran out smiling and shouting to her:

«Don't worry about me. This is the easiest thing. I will be back in the afternoon.»

When he disappeared behind the hill, Nekija began to arrange the wood, then she saw the basket of cherries and felt a lump in her throat at the thought that the boy had gone without tasting them.

### CHAPTER III

#### 1

All that day Arta had been astir despite the repeated advice of her comrades to be very cautious. The day was fine, and she thought she should take advantage of the unusual quietness. She noticed neither any suspicious movements on the streets leading to the first house where she had to go nor any of those hated

quisling face. Zef had told her about the news that had come from Peza and she was convinced that the setback the enemy had suffered was the reason for the relative tranquility in the town. Then there was the execution of Galip Bey which had frightened the mercenaries to death. It was they that until recently had helped the Germans in the night controls. Arta was glad that she too had a part in that daring undertaking. «but the Philosopher, who was one of the principal contributors to its success, must be out of his mind with joy ...» she said to herself. She could imagine the boy pioneer as she had seen him that day at Sadete's house when he rushed in with his hair all ruffled, carrying the plate on which he had scribbled the number of the car by which the bey was going to travel to Lushnja and had made his report. How his eyes sparkled with animation when he insisted that Arta should write down everything word for word and pass it on to Alert. It had sounded like a joke to Arta, but on the following day, when she had reported it to Alert, she had seen how serious it was. Then the whole affair had been carried out with a clockwork precision, but that, of course, was the concern of the Party ....

The street leading from Fuat Bey's Hill to the El-basan street was as quiet and empty of people as the Shëngjergji street which had been just left behind her. Arta's task seemed easy, hearing the clock strike nine and, calculating the time she needed for all her tasks, she said to herself: «That is fine»!

At the «Partizani» street she glanced to the right, to the narrow street of Risto's house where she was to ask something, as Zef had instructed her, but she did not like the face of a thin man who was walking up and down right in front of the house. So she was obliged to by-pass him along the sidewalk and continue on her way.

When she crossed the boulevard and directed her

steps towards the fire wood market, a piece of road that had always been risky, Arta had to stop several times, pretending to arrange her stockings, to make sure there was nothing suspicious, until she reached Sadete's house. Only a few days ago, she had been in that house but it seemed to her that it was years before. She stepped to the door and looked through the keyhole; the courtyard seemed desolate with the overgrown grass among the stone stairs, with a kettle and a pair of tongs lying on the ground as if for days nobody had touched them. There were the stairs, also, where she had seen Kopani looking at her as if he foresaw what was awaiting him. It was strange that the grass was so high that it almost covered the first step of the stairs.

Convinced that mother Sadete had abandoned the house, Arta decided to go away without knocking, but she had not taken two steps when a small door of a neighboring house opened and mother Sadete appeared dressed in black and holding in her hand a pair of tongs with which she was carefully carrying a burning piece of charcoal. When she saw the girl she gave a short cry of surprise, but instead of rushing to take her in her arms, she looked first right and left, dropped the tongs and motioned to the girl to follow her in her house.

When they were in, the old woman bolted the door, grabbed the girl in her arms, stayed a while with her head on the girl's breast shedding bitter tears and whispering desparately:

My dear girl, my gentle dove ... I knew you would come and find me ... My boy had told me not to cry if he got killed 'because than you shall have many boys and girls who will love you as much as I do ...', he said to me. And so it is. Even when I was in prison the boys and girls of the Party took care of me so well that ...»

She remembered she had dropped the tongs in the street.

«I am so distracted, my girl; I forgot the fire I had borrowed from the neighbours. Everything is going wrong. For over a week I haven't kindled fire in the house. But it doesn't matter. My fire is here, in my breast. And, by god, that fire will burn the Germans as it is burning my heart.»

At first the girl said nothing, not because she could find no word of consolation but because she too was in tears. When she recovered she began to talk to the old woman, about a tract in which the Party described the death of Kopani as an act of sublime heroism which must serve as an example to all the communists ... The cells and the groups of sympathizers had kept a minute of silence to honour his memory and the comrades had sworn to revenge his death ... Every morning the Germans and the quislings found bunches of flowers laid on his tomb by the comrades and the pioneers of the Party.

Mother Sadete felt the soothing effect of these words, wiped away her tears, sighed deeply and asked:

«And how are you getting on with your party work?»

«We are in difficulty about a house where to set up the technical equipment,» explained the girl, «and the comrades have given me the task to solve that problem at any cost.»

Mother Sadete frowned and looked at Arta thoughtfully.

«Do you mean you are going to take it away from here?» she asked with a look of disappointment and felt as if all her force had gone out of her.

«No, mother, but we don't know the situation ... Have they come to control the house lately?»

«Oh, so many times ...» — smiled the old woman. «They have come and turned everything upside down. They have wrenched down the boards of the ceiling, they have pulled down some of the walls, but they never found the cellar in which my son used

to print the tracts. How could they? He was a master in that sort of work. A master ... Eh, my girl, human beings are queer things ... They endure more than the wood or the stone... But as for the cellar and your technical work, I can assure you that nobody will find them.»

Arta smiled as if with effort:

«In other words, you mean that we can again begin our work here, in your house?»

«You shouldn't ask such a question. And how glad I will be when I will see once more his comrades come and go as if at their own home! How glad I will be to see them continue their work while I will be watching at the gate, in the courtyard and around the house to make sure that nobody is spying on you ... Of course I am afraid, but it is for you that I am afraid, not for myself.»

«All right, mother, thank you,» Arta cut short the old woman's assurances. «I came only to take a look, for that is what the comrades asked me to do; not only that, but also to tell you that whatever need you may have, you must leave word at that milk shop. Do you understand? Whatever need.»

Mother Sadete did not reply but nodded, while her face was taking a more self-assured expression, more like at the time when her heart had not yet received that terrible wound.

## 2

Arta was still under the impressions of her meeting with mother Sadete, wondering at the fortitude the old woman was showing despite the tragic loss of her son, when she found herself on the Kusi street. She had not noticed how she had passed through all the

narrow streets and passages that led to that street. Now she remembered that she should have looked into the house of Comrade Deko which she had just left behind her. But she had not enough time and it wouldn't be wise to turn back. She clenched her teeth in anger with herself, crossed to the other sidewalk and took the narrow street in which she had her main task.

Professor Filipi, unlike most people, had left the street door open, and Arta was relieved for not having to knock and entered quietly after having looked up and down the street. As she was going up the stairs flanked by flower, pots, she heard an unusual sound inside and stopped to listen.

«Was habt Ihr hier zu suchen?» (what do you want here?), she heard a loud voice behind her and was so startled that instead of replying in the manner she had prepared for such occasions, she started to run. But it was too late. The German guard reached the door first and shut it with a kick.

«Halt! Halt!»

Armed men in various uniforms poured from the house to the veranda. Among the Germans with helmets and metal plaques on the chest Arta recognized the police sergeant she had met some days before to whom she had said that she was Major Jahaja's niece.

The sergeant descended the steps, pushed back his cap and looked at her with a sneer:

«So it is you, eh? Major Jahja's niece! And I am Sergeant Noga, his former orderly. But I am not lying. It is so nice to meet you again. Only now, my pretty one, you will have to tell me who you really are» he altered his voice as he saw the oberleutenant and his feldgendarmes approaching and watching them with curiosity.

«I don't know what you want from me,» said the girl looking on the ground. «I don't know you and have never seen you.»

«What does she say? asked the oberleutenant. The sergeant tried to explain to him with more gestures than words, and that irritated the officer who ordered something to one of the soldiers.

Suddenly a small army lorry, all covered with dust, stopped before the street door. Beside the uniformed driver was sitting a civilian with a swollen face and graying hair.

Arta withheld with difficulty, a cry of distress when she saw Professor Filipi coming down from the back of the lorry with his hands tied, without his glasses, with his shirt torn and his pale face blackened in several places by the blows he had received. Two german soldiers were holding him. The civilian with the swollen face came out of the lorry and hurried after the others. Then spoke to the professor in pure Albanian:

«Don't try to hide anything. They have all the facts, that is why they brought you here. You must only tell who are your links if you want to save your life. There is no other way.»

The professor turned with an effort his head to the interpreter, maybe to say something to him, but he noticed Arta who was looking at him with despair, and stopped short.

The girl tried to convey to him with her eyes that he must not reveal anything, but he only bent his head as if hit by an unexpected blow and walked with difficulty up the steps of the veranda dragging his feet.

3

When he was led into the room and saw all those men in uniforms staring at him with unfriendly eyes,

Professor Filipi lost all hope. «Now it is all over with me,» he thought. The oberleutenant looked at him with a sarcastic smile with which he seemed to be saying: «It is no use denying your links now. You can go on denying as long as you wish, there are others who will confirm them.» Professor Filipi was convinced by now that the girl he had seen standing free and apparently undisturbed among the German soldiers in the yard was the main cause of his misfortune. She must certainly have delivered to the Germans his notes with the foreign news he had taken down from the radio. Else, why should they arrest him only a few days after she had been introduced to him?

The oberleutenant did not let him continue his reflections. He caught him by the ear and pulled him to the big «Telefunken» radio and gramophone set standing in one of the corners of the room. He opened the small drawer of the apparatus, pulled out a pile of gramophone records which he threw on the floor, pulled the professor by the ear until his head was almost in the drawer, switched on his electric torch and shouted in his language.

«Read what is written here and tell us what it means!»

Professor Filipi strained his eyes to read the timetables and wavelengths of the news broadcasts that were carefully written on the bottom of the drawer and turned with difficulty to the interpreter:

«Tell him that these notes are not mine, that I have bought that radio-set second hand some two years ago and that I have never thought what was written in that drawer.

The oberleutenant put his torch back in his pocket, wiped his hands with a handkerchief and, with his usual sardonic smile, pronounced clearly, stressing:

«You... mean ... you ... persist in denying? Very well! And that fräulein in the yard, what is she to you?»



When the professor heard the word «fräulein», he understood what the officer meant and felt as if all his blood had run out from him.

«The serpent!» he thought. «Well, now I can do nothing about it, whatever they decide to do. But what is life, after all? The toss of a coin. Only a thin metal plate separates 'head from tail', honour from shame. Now I have at least the chance to follow the example of so many of my own pupils.»

These thoughts flashed through his mind while the man with the puffy face was translating his words to the officer.

«I don't know her and I have never seen her before,» said Professor Filipi with a new resolute voice.

The interpreter had not finished, when the officer took a step back and struck the professor on the face with his fist.

The professor reeled back, then crumpled on the grounds his face covered with blood.

A moment later Arta saw the oberleutenant come out angry from the room and, without turning his head, say something to the interpreter who was coming after him. The interpreter motioned to the girl to follow him into another room which had its door open. The girl shuddered and felt so weak that she could not move.

«Los! (Go!)» shouted the officer and stamped his foot on the floor.

«Quick, quick,» repeated hurriedly the interpreter.

Arta, accompanied by two German guards and the police sergeant, entered the room trying to appear calm and decided to deny any acquaintance with Professor Filipi. She had decided it even before, when she was afraid that the professor would tell the truth, but now there

was every evidence that the professor had not revealed anything. Else there was not reason why the officer should be so angry.

The oberleutenant was standing with one hand resting on a book case and the other stuck under the belt holding his revolver. He scanned the girl from head to foot, then, looking at nobody in particular, asked to be told what relations she had with the arrested man.

«I don't even know his name,» replied the girl calmly.

«But he ...» the officer glared at her, «he knows you well.

«It is impossible. I have never seen that man's face before.»

She gave her answer with such a show of natural frankness that it made the officer hesitate.

«Can the «fräulein» tell us, in that case, what brought her to the house of the arrested man?» he asked again, this time more politely, but convinced that the question must bring out the truth.

Arta nodded:

«It was just a whim of the moment. I came to ask for a palm branch. I knew there were palm trees in this house and I needed a branch for a wreath I wanted to make...» she paused a little. She had meant to say that she wanted the wreath for the tomb of her grandmother who had died recently, but then she changed her mind thinking that her grandmother's death in other people's house might arouse suspicions. «It was the anniversary of my father's death and it is our custom to lay a wreath on the tomb on such occasions.»

While the interpreter translated, the officer's face darkened, his jaws and his lips stiffened, he drew a packet of cigarettes from his pocket, lighted it nervously then blew out a small cloud of smoke. He stood for a moment with his eyes on the ceiling then stretched

his hand to the interpreter and said something in German.

«The oberleutenant allows you five minutes to tell the truth,» said the interpreter as if he was reciting a lesson. «Otherwise you are lost,» he added from himself.

Arta frowned, turned her head impulsively to the interpreter with an astonished expression, as if she had heard something very unexpected, and began to protest:

«What truth? I told you the truth. What else can I tell?»

The officer pursed up his lips and raised his eyebrows, an attitude which the interpreter did not need to explain. In the pause that followed the officer loosened his watch from his wrist and set it on the bookcase.

The thoughts that crossed her mind during those five minutes cannot be expressed. With the slight smile she had been trying to maintain in the presence of these wolves, she looked through the window at the palm tree in the yard, which was waving its branches in the light breeze, uncovering and shutting off the sight of the Zaimi mosque minaret and the gilt skyline of the Dajti mountain in the distance.

Where were the comrades now and what were they thinking about her? A wave of heat filled her breast as she thought of Alert. How happy she had been until now and had not realised it! But she should not give way to despair and to the tears that were ready to flow from her eyes. No, she knew very well that these were moments of supreme test for the communists; she recalled the last meeting of the District committee when comrade Zef gave them the news of Kopani's death, the bitterness and anger of the comrades who swore with their fists raised high to take his revenge. Would they not do the same for her? And mother Sadete? She remembered them all, exchanged mentally

a word with each of them and felt their gentle reproach: «Eh, Arta, Arta! Why did you allow this happen to you? How could you be so careless?»

She remembered the watch. But it was not seemly to look at it. No. The others could bother about her. She only wished that those five minutes were a little longer, so that she could live her short dream to the end with all the people who were so dear to her heart ... Then? Well, let the enemies do what they wanted to do ...

They had switched on the small lamp on the ceiling which made the room look darker than its brown walls made it. Apart from a bookcase with three rows of books and a wooden sofa there was practically no other furniture. No woman's hand had recently gone over the floor. The curtain of the window was drawn carelessly to one side. Why was it in such condition? Had they also arrested the rest of the professor's family? Poor professor! Zef had said that he was not a party member. That was something! ... But he wasn't the only one to behave so bravely. There were Reshit Myzyri and another old man who were known to others as simple people, but, they also had behaved like heroes. Once it had been the cellars of the SIM and the Italian ponce officers, at Porto Romano and Ventotene; now it was in the claws of the Gestapo. The Gestapo! She repeated the hated name in her mind and a line crossed instinctively her forehead. She had heard about the terrible crimes committed by the Gestapo and visualized it in her imagination as a monster, as a kind of Frankenstein she had seen once in some American film which moved and acted like a man but had no human thought, no human conscience for what it was doing when with a mechanical smile it was tearing off a limb or the head of a child; or like those prehistoric monsters with wings and many legs which caught you in their claws and squeezed until there was no breath left in you.

She felt her forehead wet with cold sweat and made a movement to change her position.

«The time is up!» shouted the oberleutenant savagely and took his watch back from the bookcase.

The room shook from his voice and from the movement of hobnailed boots and arms that had remained still during the five-minutes period. Arta felt the cold steel of the handcuffs on her wrist and a blow on her side by the butt of a rifle when they pushed her towards the door. Behind her the feldgendarmes were dragging the body of the professor who had not yet regained his senses after the blow he had received.

On their way, Arta was trying to judge from the movements of the lorry where they were taking them to, but she failed. From the third turning to the left, into a street all bumps and holes, she lost her sense of orientation because of the professor who groaned every jolt of the lorry. In the complete darkness of the car she could give free vent to her tears without being noticed by the guards.

When the lorry pulled up, she wiped her tears and prepared herself to come out. They dumped them in the yard of a two-storied house surrounded by high walls. She saw many people in uniforms coming and going, gazing at her with curiosity and mockery and, when they ordered her to go first into the house, she turned to the interpreter and said with her head raised high:

«I am a girl. Where are they taking me to?»

The man with the puffy face pursed his mouth

surprised at her daring. One of the feldgendarmes, when he heard what she was asking, caught her by the arms and pushed her with force through the door. She fell on the concrete floor, tried to raise herself on her elbows and knees, but it was impossible. Then someone caught her by the hair, dragged her over the floor and down a flight of stairs hurling her into a deep dark place. Arta could see neither the man who had dragged her nor the place where they had taken her. She only heard the click of the door being locked... After that ...

At four o'clock a.m. when they came for the third time for her the girl was unable to talk. She felt her head heavy and her tongue thick and swollen. The hair, which had fallen over her face, was sticking on her skin, and only when she was on the stairs leading to the upper floor she saw that it was drenched in blood. Two of her front teeth were broken; her cheeks were hollow, her eyes were sunken and all her face was smeared with blood, all that had made her unrecognizable.

Professor Filipi, whom they brought a little later for a confrontation, was in an even worse condition. Blood was oozing from his finger-nails, signs of burning with hot iron were on his face and on his naked shoulders. His arms were hanging limp but a little raised as if he was keeping them from hurting his arm-pits. Even his eyes were not always looking straight but were squinting from time to time. He opened his mouth astonished when the oberleutenant asked him through the Interpreter to tell what were his relations with the girl in front of him. He stared for a moment at her, then at the officer, then said nothing but only shook his head in a way indicating that he could not understand what the officer was talking about.

«You mean you have never set eyes on that girl before?» asked the officer sarcastically.

«Never in my life,» said at last the professor weakly.

«Not even yesterday in your house?»

Professor Filipi straightened with an effort his body and, with his mouth open and his eyes wide with bewilderment, looked once more at Arta, who had also turned her face towards him. He stared fascinated at her blood-smeared face with the broken teeth which disfigured her but at the same time gave her the appearance of a martyr suffering for a high ideal; he was particularly impressed by the steady look of her big black eyes which he remembered to have seen before, in very different circumstances, and he felt his heart swell with pride and hope for the Albanian youth. In the corners of her lips he could see that shadow of a smile which spoke of pity and determination and which could not be marked by the deep line on her forehead testifying to the terrible drama she was undergoing.

Professor Filipi felt himself shamed by that calm face and at the same time proud of her and he regretted the doubts he had had about her the day before. «I ought to be ashamed of myself for calling her a serpent. It is a pity I can't fall on my knees and beg her pardon. I would like to tell her ...»

He found he could not have expressed his feelings to that communist girl even if he were given the opportunity. The oberleutenant, glaring at him angrily, invited him not to beat about the bush but to answer directly and clearly.

«Yes. This is the girl,» said the professor clearly although his lips were trembling. «This is the girl I saw yesterday in the yard of my house. But I have never seen her before and I do not know who she is. Why are you tormenting me? Kill me if you find I am guilty of something but don't torture me in vain.»

He pronounced the last words with difficulty, as

if he had no force to continue. He bowed his head again and groaned. A short pause followed. The oberleutenant pressed the button of the electric bell on his table and looked through the window at the red rays of the sun reflected on the window of the house opposite. A man entered without knocking, rather stout and tall wearing military breeches with bulging pockets and leggings from resin-impregnated material like that used for tents. He had a shaven head with irregular bumps on it, his dark face was almost square, with protruding cheekbones and big teeth which his lips seemed unable to cover. His square jaws were like two blocks of wood joined roughly together in the middle of his chin. He was wearing a brown shirt with unbuttoned collar that showed his hairy chest and with sleeves rolled up to his elbows. The bulging pockets of his breeches were filled with all sorts of mechanical tools. Arta saw a small dagger fastened upside down on his waist.

He stood in the middle of the room looking expectantly at the officer. His bulging round eyes, looked motionless and naked like the eyes of a dead skinned animal.

Arta saw him and turned her eyes away to hide her horror and disgust. It was the face of that robot monster she had seen in a film which had terrified her so much in her childhood. She clenched her teeth and waited with anguish.

The oberleutenant did not move from his seat. He only motioned with his hand to the man to proceed with his job. Only then the eyes of the man flashed with a savage light as those of a wild beast ready to jump with fangs and claws over its prey. He rushed at the professor, caught him by the neck with his heavy hand and dragged him out of the room.

From the corridor came the receding pitiful cries of the professor: «Kill me! Kill me! Why are you torturing me?» But soon every sound ceased and in



she was diving in a bad dream. A minute later the monster came back and this time he walked towards the girl.

## CHAPTER IV

### I

It was long since the house of Rrem Gurrasi at the lower end of the village, with its walls of brown stone, with the woods behind it and a large garden in front, had last seen so many people in it as on that night. But from outside it had the appearance of an abandoned house, here no human being had lived for a long time. Ever since the day when he was informed that a very important party meeting, not without danger, was going to be held in his house, Rrem had taken all the necessary measures to prevent anybody in the village from learning anything about that meeting: he had sent his wife and the children to Priska to his brother-in-law and had taken his sheep, the oxen and the dog to his nephew who could keep them for two days with his own animals, as he had done on several previous occasions.

About himself Rrem had let it be known that he was going to Tirana to see about a fine unjustly imposed on him and that it might take him some days to see it through. Then he had closed the shutters and locked the street door and had shut himself up waiting for

the arrival of the people as Bimi, had told him to do. He noticed the first signs when darkness had fallen: he heard the sound of pebbles thrown at the roof of the house rolling down over the tiles. He ran to the hedge behind the house where the woods ended and felt relieved from the anxiety that had oppressed him throughout the day when he recognized in the dark Piciruku and Rexha with three other partisans. He showed them in, lighted an oil lamp, offered them each a cigarette and came out again at the hedge. Other comrades followed at short intervals, one by one or in small groups, and it took almost two hours until they were all in. Rrem was glad that the meeting was about to begin and would probably not continue too long. He hoped that it would be over before dawn, but he was still worried because he had not yet seen Bimi who had told him that he would come and bring Zef and Alert with him. Surely, without those two the meeting could not begin its proceedings.

All were silent in the large room after supper. Only Rrem came and went restlessly which was unusual for him. Some of the comrades smoked, the others stared at the floor thoughtfully or leaned with their backs against the wall. Hours passed and the light of the oil lamp was getting paler and paler.

«Don't worry, comrades. Everything will be all right» said Piciruku who was sitting by the fireplace and did not enjoy the silence. He nudged with his elbow the comrade sitting beside him: «Come on, comrade commissar let us start that song about 'The proletarian brigades' and wake these sluggards up.»

«Are you in your right mind?» asked the commissar surprised.

«Why not? Are you afraid the Fritzes will hear

and come to surround us? No, Piciruku assures you nothing of the sort will happen. They won't come in the night but even if they do it will be so much the worse for them.»

«This is no time for singing,» said Rexha coming in.

Rrem shook his head annoyed:

«Let Zef and Alert come first, after that you can fire with cannons if you like.»

«That is right,» intervened Ferik, who had been listening with attention.

Piciruku noticed the preoccupied face of Rrem Gurzi, glanced at his watch, saw that it was almost midnight and said:

«They should have been here by now!...» And there was doubt in his words.

## 2

Zef and Alert had arrived two hours before sunset in the village of Shkoza, in the house of a young communist, where they had met three of the leading villagers who, as Bimi had reported, had expressed readiness to join the partisan movement, but had request first to meet some of the party leaders to ask them for some clarifications.

The meeting had not taken much time and the three peasants had been satisfied. But the satisfaction was even greater on the part of Zef and Alert. The talks had ended in perfect agreement. The question they were mostly concerned about and which they wanted cleared up before turning their back on the other village elders was the question of the govern-

ment. Would the National-Liberation Front constitute its own government once it took over the power? They heard with joy that Zef and Alert had come out of Tirana for the very purpose of informing the people about the Congress of Përmet and the election of the Anti-fascist Committee which for the time being was going to act as a people's government.

«It is a big problem, indeed,» said Alert. «Now I see how gladly the people receive the news...» He had forgotten about Arta and how worried he had been about her and began to propose new actions that seemed feasible in the existing situation. But Zef's mind was elsewhere.

«You aren't listening to me,» said Alert after receiving no answer to the two questions he had asked.

At that moment they heard Bimi's steps in the yard and got to their feet. Bimi had gone out with the villagers to see if all was clear before they left for Gurra and the big meeting, but his face showed that something had gone wrong.

«The Germans have chosen just the right time for their manoeuvres!» he said glaring at Zef as if not the Germans but Zef was to blame for the unexpected setback.

«What manoeuvres, man?! The Germans don't make their manoeuvres at night,» remarked Zef.

«I don't know about that but I saw them with my own eyes. They have posted their armored cars on the road and have taken positions above the road and below it.»

«The devils!» cried Alert at the door. «Hurry up, comrades, before it is too late. We must find a way out... And we will find it even if we have to go around the Dajti mountain.»

«Yes, but that will take too much time,» said Zef.

At that moment appeared the young communist who had made observations of his own about the movements of the Germans.

«Wait just a little longer comrades,» he said lowering his voice. «They are controlling a part of the thicket they want to cut for their needs and they must be off soon.»

But the comrades did not find it reasonable to wait. So the four of them, with the young boy who had insisted to go with them and show them the way, took the uphill path in the direction opposite to that of the village of Gurra.

### 3

In the heavy silence that had fallen over the large room of Rrem Gurzi, the pebbles thrown on the roof sounded like the beating of a drum.

«They are coming!» cried Piciruku and jumped to his feet.

Rrem who had remained standing all the time, rushed out and held his breath until he reached the hedge behind his house. The others began to put in order their caps, their jackets and their cartridge belts.

«We are sorry, comrades we are late, but we went through a big adventure,» — Zef apologized as he was the first to enter the roof. Then he took off his shoes which had been hurting him, and sitting down continued:

«We were obliged to take a road three times longer than the usual one, but we could not help it. I will tell you all about it later. And you here, how are you? You must be annoyed, surely. And you must be worried too, a little, ch?»

The newcomer shook hands and exchanged embraces with everybody, and those who hadn't known him before stood staring at him with admiration.

Bimi and Alert came a little later. Bimi did not take off his boots but saluted with his raised fist, exchanged a few words with Zef and went out again, while Alert shook hands with all of them and sat down beside Piciruku.

Piciruku raised the thick of the lamp and, interrupting the commissar who was asking Zef about the cause of their delay, turned to Zef:

«You excited our curiosity to the degree of hysterics with the announcement of this meeting, comrade Zef.»

«How so?» smiled Zef pretending not to understand him.

The others stopped all talk and movement to listen.

«You did not tell us the purpose,» said Piciruku, «and it has spoiled our sleep.»

«Spoiled your sleep? You have been too hasty. Now that you will hear the news you won't be able to wink.»

The comrades were all eyes and ears expecting breathlessly as he changed the tone of his voice and expression and continued gravely:

«We bring you a wonderful news, my dear comrades, the happiest news of these three years of war under the flag of the Communist Party... The day has come at last for Albania to have its own superior legislative body, elected directly by the people at its great Congress of Përmet...»

He paused in search of the right words to express the great importance of that event, while the comrades looked at each other with wonder and joy. The word «legislative» was not familiar to all of them, but it was too early to ask questions; Ferik noted it down in his notebook.

«We shall read all the resolutions of the Congress and discuss them one by one,» continued Zef. «That is the purpose of this meeting which will enable you

to explain to the people their great importance. But before we come to that point, I would like to say, since some of you may not remember, that in the age-long history of our country, the People's Congress of Përmet can be compared only with the Convent of Lezha held in 1444, under the leadership of Scanderbeg. It is a wonderful coincidence, comrades, that exactly five hundred years after the most significant event in the history of Albania, we, the descendants of our National Hero, are repeating his legendary epic, we follow in his steps, proud and undaunted against the foreign aggressor, while the treason of Hamza and Ballaban has also left its bad seed which we see with regret in the hearts and ugly ranks of the Balli Kombëtar and the Legality organizations that have made common cause with the enemy against the people, against the nation.»

As he spoke, his face, usually pale, was flushing red in the light of the oil lamp, resembling the red of deep dawn. His forehead was sparkling with drops of sweat and his eyes, flashing in every direction, seemed to be irradiating shafts of bright light. He put his hand in his breast pocket and drew a packet of papers, then came by the lamp and began to read them.

4

The meeting ended a little before dawn. The comrades, embracing and kissing each other, separated and went in different directions. Only Zef, Alert, Rexha, Piciruku and Bimi remained in the room. At that moment the host, who had been bickering with the others in the yard, came in the room carrying a big tray in his hands with a big bowl of sour milk, wooden spoons and several pieces of maize bread.

He set the tray by the fireplace and turned to Bimi:

«Why didn't you tell me a minute earlier, you dumb fool, or you wanted to cover my home with shame by letting the comrades go without having anything to eat? When has such a thing happened? Shame on you and my family!...»

His indignation was stirred up even more by Piciruku:

«Come, Rrem, come. Don't pretend to be so generous. Remember what you did last night when, instead of killing a lamb, you offered us your miserly chunks of chicken. For when are you keeping your livestock? For the epoch of communism? Then nobody will need any of it.»

«God is my testimony that this isn't true!» he said his eyes wide with exasperation. «You know perfectly well what I had to do yesterday. Or do I have to repeat it to him?» he mentioned with his head at Zef.

Zef laughed:

«You don't seem to know Piciruku well enough, comrade Rrem.»

«I know him, I know him. I have often had to deal with him.»

«No, you don't know him. He is joking. Take a good look at him.»

Piciruku had hidden his face behind Alert trying to hold back his laughter. Rrem looked at him and tightened his jaws.

«Eh, the rascal!» he sighed at last calming down, invited the comrades to «take a mouthful of bread» and went out.

After their breakfast, Alert asked the comrades what they thought about returning to Tirana. They had intended to go back before dawn, but the meeting had delayed them longer than they had expected. Now it was morning and they had to find a new solution.



«I don't think it is as difficult as Alert finds it,» said Piciruku. «We will choose the way that seems less dangerous if anything shows up, we have our automatic rifles. That is all there is to it.»

Alert was irritated:

«Leave your heroism for some other occasion, you Piciruku. Do you hear? If you have some serious proposal, out with it! Else you better keep quiet. Besides, our return to Tirana does not concern you. You know you are not allowed to go to Tirana... Look how he reasons,» Alert addressed Zef. «He forgets that his photo is known to the Germans and the mercenaries better than that of their Führer.»

«No, I haven't forgotten it. But I am not going to stay away from Tirana all my life. Ten days is quite enough for the Germans.»

«Are you serious?» asked Zef looking Piciruku straight in the eyes.

But Piciruku insisted.

«I have to go back, comrades. It is not a question of my wish but of my duty. First of all there is that matter of the prison which we decided two weeks ago and are putting off all this time. Then I have prepared a plan for Mr. Backa of Lapruka who is becoming insupportable. Do you know what Galip Bey declared about him before he was executed? I have spoken about it with Comrade Toja and he told me to discuss it with you. I am not going to take part in it directly but, I have to make some investigations on the spot which nobody else can make. As for being cautious, Comrade Alert is troubling his head in vain, because I don't intend to throw away my life for nothing and I know how to take care of myself.»

Piciruku also explained some other matters, but the important thing was to lay a trap for Mr. Backa and take him alive out of Tirana. Then...

«Nonsense!» burst out Alert. «How do you think

you can do such a thing? Do you take Backa for a perfect idiot?!»

«No, comrade Alert. Nobody thinks Backa is an idiot. On the contrary, he is the cleverest among the traitors. And it is because he is so clever that we have to prepare ourselves carefully before we undertake anything against him; I have some advantage that can help much in that matter since, as you know, I am better acquainted with the Lapraka quarter and know all our sympathizers who live there. Then, when everything is ready, we will call the comrades of Peza, particularly Ferik, who knows the workers of the brick-yard, the messenger Veli who has almost recovered, and the sergeant of the jail who has put himself at our disposal for anything. And he knows only me.»

«I beg your pardon,» Alert wanted again to raise an objection.

«Let Rexha speak first,» said Zef. «Is Comrade Toja well informed about the difficulties of this action, or Piciruku has presented it to him as a rose garden and he has not objected?»

«I know nothing about it,» replied Rexha thoughtfully. «Comrade Piciruku, when have you talked it over with Toja?»

«Only a few days ago. You weren't there at that time. You had gone to look for a better place to establish your printing press. It was my proposal, and Toja told me to talk it over first thing with the comrades. It isn't as though we have already decided to go ahead with the action.»

After a short pause, Zef began to talk.

«It is my impression that Piciruku is more concerned about returning to Tirana than about carrying out that action. Is there any sense that we, before putting into effect the first action on which we had all agreed, to begin a new action which we haven't yet studied? No, comrade Piciruku, you are wrong in this. You could have helped us much more in that action at the

prison and it could have been carried out by now, if you were in charge of it, but we excluded you from it not because we wanted to, but because the circumstances did not allow us to do otherwise. We can take into consideration the action you are proposing as soon as possible, but we can't allow you to go to Tirana to organize it. We can find other ways and you can be sure that your help will be appreciated. Is that clear? Let us return now to the first question. How are we to go back to Tirana?»

They exchanged opinions, while Piciruku stood hanging his head disappointed, which made his small face appear more dry and dark than ever. The least risky way was to follow along the torrent of the Lana brook, sending ahead Bimi and Rrem who knew well the lay of the land.

The sun had not yet risen when they parted with Piciruku with a word of consolation and advice. He raised his eyes, attempted a smile, when Alert embraced him and whispered something in his ear.

«Is that true?» Piciruku asked frowning.

Alert was impressed by the troubled face of his comrade and suspected that Piciruku had serious reasons for wanting to go to Tirana.

«It is quite true. But the fault is yours. Comrade Piciruku, because you know Safka well enough and yet you won't give up your childish whims. Do you expect to keep her love for you by staying near her? By no means, comrade. On the contrary, Safka is right to resent your suspicions. She is a communist and she understands love as a communist, not as a bourgeois. Let that be clear to you, do you hear? This was all I wanted to tell you. So long!»

Piciruku remained standing to follow with his eyes Alert, who ran to catch up with his comrades.

They had made good progress before the sun appeared and were approaching the village of Shkoza. An old olive tree standing lonely above the road was their meeting place with Bimi and Rrem, who had gone ahead to investigate the situation in the village. The three comrades turned to the right and entered a thicket not far from the olive tree. So far they had met nobody on their way, but a little below the turning of the road they saw a group of villagers coming towards them, some on horseback, some walking, talking animatedly, but it was not clear whether they were quarrelling or just joking among themselves. Zef and Rexha moved deeper into the thicket and sat down under the trees, while Alert hid himself behind a bush at the fringe of the woods to watch the villagers unobserved.

The travellers were approaching. Two of them were walking a little ahead of the others and among them Alert could distinguish an old man wearing a high white fez and under it a big headkerchief that covered a part of his face. One of the two first men was teasing the old man and laughing at his replies.

«What a funny old man you are, by god! I would name you a prefect if the time you are talking about would ever come.

«A prefect?» the old man replied disgusted. «Me a prefect? You are wrong, my boy. First I will have your head cut off.»

«Why so?»

«Because you are not in your right mind. Do you expect the partisans to leave you in peace after what you just told us?»

«But I did it out of fear, uncle. What if the Germans should find them in my house?»

«It makes no difference. Albania needs no cowards, no men who make it in their drawers at the least danger.»

Alert who had been straining his ears to hear what the villagers were talking about, turned suddenly to his comrades.

«That is father Llani! I wonder what he is doing here, I will go down and ask him.»

As the comrades did not object, he took down the path and stopped to wait for the old man by the road.

The two villagers walking ahead of the group greeted him by nodding their heads, as it was customary with casual travellers, although his clothes had impressed them. Father Llani stared at him until he recognized him, then whispered to his companions:

«It is Xhemal Aga's boy... He must have come to see his father's clients... You know Xhemal Petrela, the merchant who is always cheating us, selling us a kilo for an oka, squeezing the life out of us for the money we owe him. Yes, by god, he must have come to claim his father's money. I also owe him money, and he gives me no peace about it. Still, I lose nothing if I ask him to put it off a little later. I will do that as long as I can and when my time comes, I will show him my elbow.»

He led his horse to the side where Alert was standing so as to let the others go by and began to greet him by putting his hand over his heart and by pouring a torrent of words:

«I hope you are well, you worthy son of Xhemal Aga, I wish you health and luck. So you are doing your father's job? It did not take you long to follow in his steps. That is fine, fine!»

Alert shook his head smiling. The old man came closer, shook hands with him and, when he saw that the others had gone far enough, changed his manner and asked anxiously:

«What are you doing here? The boy is looking for you at Shkoza.»

«What boy?»

«The one that used to buy cherries from me.»

«The Philosopher? When did you see him?»

«About an hour ago. I brought him to the village and left him there; he must be still looking for you.»

6

The old man and the Philosopher parted at the point where the road forked not far from the village. The boy took the road to the village which was flanked by a double row of trees. His hands in his pockets and his head high, he looked as if he wanted to chat with the birds that were chirping among the leaves of the trees.

Life in the open seemed so beautiful, with no troubles and with so many birds in the sky. Perhaps that was why the language of the birds was so like a song, a song he was delighted to hear. For a moment he forgot what had brought him there. He sat down on a stone covered with green moss and began to watch a bird of varied colours which had perched on a branch of an apple tree and was singing for all it was worth. There was a sad note in its song. The boy had seen before a bird like this one, shut in a green cage with white wire netting on the balcony of the beautiful house with the rose garden on the Dibra street which belonged to Mr. Eqrem. «It sang in the same sad way as if it was crying. But it had every reason to be sad because they had shut it behind iron bars, whereas this one here is free...», thought the Philosopher. «This one is all by itself up there. Who

is it? Nobody stops it from flying where it wishes. Woe to those who are in a cage! But this one has no reason to cry. They say that jail is like a cage with thick iron bars... Poor Artal!...»

He got to his feet and resumed his walk uphill, but then he thought that it would not be easy to find the comrades. Whom could he ask? Not just anybody, of course. He should have consulted father Llani. Surely the old man could direct him to some trusted man in the village. Some rare villagers could be seen about the fields to the left and in the gardens among the houses, weeding the plants or repairing the fences. There was a woman, too, tending to the green onions in the garden before her house. High up on the hill where the mosque stood isolated, he saw a boy a little bigger than himself who was driving a small flock of sheep that were snatching here around them butting each other with their budding little horns.

The Philosopher walked towards the boy, thinking on the way how to approach him and find out something about his friend. At that moment the boy turned his head and looked with curiosity shading his eyes with his hand, but not at the Philosopher, which made the Philosopher change his plan and try something else. From the upper part of the street were coming one after the other two peasants; the first one was an elderly man with short mustaches who was carrying a milk-can on his shoulders as if it was not heavy for him. The second one was a young man with a high snow-white fez tilted over one eye and with a large kerchief tied around his neck. The Philosopher almost cried out with joy when he saw the big boots of the fellow fastened with strings of different colours instead of regular shoe-strings. What luck! It was Bimi who since yesterday, was dressed like a peasant, and the new fez and the kerchief with flowers on his neck had changed completely his appearance.

The boy ran towards him and threw himself in his arms. Bimi could not believe his eyes when he saw the Philosopher and, shaking his head in wonder, said:

«How interesting! What brought you here? It seems like a dream, by my ideal!... But first let us leave that thing somewhere and then I will give you news from your father.»

«The news about my father can wait, Comrade Bimi. I have other worries now,» said the boy sadly.

«Worries? What worries?»

The boy looked apprehensively at the peasant who had set the milk-can on the ground and was watching them with curiosity.

«Come on, speak, said Bimi impatiently. «Don't mind Comrade Rrem, he is one of ours.»

«I am looking for Alert... I must find him... They have arrested Arta...,» the Philosopher blurted out and burst into tears.

To Bimi, who was a member of the cell of which Arta was the responsible, the news was doubly distressing, but he tried to control his emotion and to console the boy as well as he could:

«Wait now, wait. Why should you cry like that? Pioneers should endure worse things, not just an arrest which, for all I know, may prove to be a matter of two or three days. The Party will certainly find a way to put the thing right. Come, now, take it like a man, like a true philosopher...»

The boy raised his eyes and a ray of hope shone through his tears.

«But where can we find Alert?» asked he brushing his tears with the back of his hand.

Bimi whispered something to Rrem. The villager lifted the can to his shoulders and asked. «What shall I do after that?»

«Nothing. You will come here and wait for me.



I won't be long. Not more than a quarter of an hour."

Then Bimi took the Philosopher by the hand and walked with him up the street he had come from.

7

Although they had not been waiting very long in the woods, time had crawled slowly for Zef and his comrades. The words of the old man had increased their anxiety about Arta. The Philosopher could not have come to Shkoza unless there was a serious reason for it. Last night Alert had asked him to keep an eye on Arta. Although he tried to keep calm, Alert was extremely restless and could not stay still but every now and then went to the road to try to see or hear something. Rexha was making supposition after supposition, not so much to comfort Alert as to test his and Zef's opinion. They had both been close friends to her and must have an idea about what could have happened. Zef was extremely worried, but he never showed his feelings. Rexha could judge about his state of mind only by the number of cigarettes he was smoking.

"Say something, comrades, why don't you speak?" Rexha could no longer endure the heavy silence.

"What can we say?" replied Zef with a sigh. "We are fighters, Rexha. Whatever happens, we have to face it as fighters do. Don't you think so, Alert? The truth is that we don't know what has happened to Arta and can say nothing until we learn the facts." Zef threw away the end of his cigarette and became silent again.

A light breeze began to stir the branches of the trees, the bushes and the grass. Alert raised again his head and looked towards the village.

«Can you see anything?» asked Zef.

«No.»

«Yes, there is something. Look who is coming,» cried Rexha who had got to his feet and was straining his eyes towards the far end of the path beyond the thicket.

Bimi and the Philosopher were walking fast and were in no time with the comrades. The Philosopher, who was drenched in sweat and whose skirt had come out over his trousers, stopped to arrange it as soon as he saw Alert, then threw away the stick he was holding and wiped the sweat from his face.

Alert was the first to give him his hand.

You got tired, eh? Why did you come so far? Did you have news that could not wait? Come here and tell us what it is. I hope it is good news, but we are prepared for bad news, too. You ought to know it.»

The boy turned aside to avoid Alert's eyes.

«Tell us everything,» continued Alert urging him. «We are not Ballists to be afraid of bad news... Is Arta alive?»

The Philosopher straightened his little body, looked at Alert, then at the others and, shocked by the last question, cried:

«She is alive, alive! Who says she isn't?»

«We don't know anything. That is why we ask.»

«She is alive, repeated the boy lowering his eyes,» but she was arrested, Comrade Alert... Together with that man who used to give news from the radio to the communists. Sheja told me, the servant of Major Jahja. She had overheard the dog tell it to his friends on the telephone. That nasty beast!»

## CHAPTER V

### 1

The three comrades returned to Tirana by mid-day, when the heat of the day was at its highest. Zef and Alert had entered the town separately, at different points, after Bimi and the Philosopher had been sent ahead to investigate the situation, while Rexha who had boasted that he would enter the town more easily than the others by using a false identity card, issued to «Resul Dervishi, finance employee», almost got himself into trouble. He walked to the road-block on the Shengjergji street where a new corporal of the gendarmerie was on duty, a young man from the Tepelena villages, a former dervish, who had recently been transferred to Tirana and was known to be rather tolerant in allowing people to pass, without even asking them their documents.

This time he not only asked Rexha for his identity card but examined the photo on it closely and began to ask questions:

«Where do you come from?»

«From Kruja. It is written in the card.»

«And you are working in Tirana?»

«Yes, in Tirana.»

«Married?»

«No. Only engaged. I am just coming back from a visit to my fiancée. She is the daughter of a dervish and lives near a teqe.

«Is that so? Are you a bektashi yourself?»

«Yes.»

«Very well. You can go,» and the corporal saluted him.

That evening, when Rexha went to the base on the

Tinker's street to report on the measures he had taken about the printing and distribution of the materials of the Congress proceedings, he began by describing the incident with the corporal:

«Funny why he behaved like that! But I deserved it for going straight in the wolf's mouth,» and he gave himself a knock on the head. «If he had gone a minute longer, I would have been in real trouble.»

«What would you have done?» asked Zef absent-mindedly.

Rexha shrugged his shoulders.

Alert, who was walking up and down the room, with one hand in his pocket, turned to Zef irritated:

«Why are you asking? He would have raised up his hands like that girl...»

This seemed to have sealed the conversation. Everybody in the room stood silent. It was getting dark and no one thought to switch on the light.

Only now Rexha realized how inappropriately he had interrupted the talk of these grave-faced people with his ridiculous story about the roadblock. He should at least have asked about Arta. It wasn't decent on his part.

The thought that his comrades could have heard something new about the girl and that he had completely forgotten to ask about her, was lying heavy on his conscience. For a moment he felt a stranger among his comrades and was ashamed of himself. «How did I let this happen to me?»

In the growing darkness of the room he looked stealthily at his comrades but read nothing from their faces. Then he reached the switch with his hand and turned on the light.

«That is fine!» said Zef. «We did not notice it was so dark.»

Rexha took a breath of relief:

«Yes, indeed. He had been anxiously waiting for someone to break the silence that was weighing so

heavy on him. «We were plunged in darkness...and silence,» he continued without looking at anyone in particular. «Like monks in a monastery. It was my fault, of course, but...»

«Why do you behave sometimes like a child, old boy?»

Alert cut him short.

Rexha spoke no more. He leaned with his elbows on the table and prepared to listen to Zef, who began to relate in detail the news just brought in by Alert, in particular about the arrest of Arta and the professor.

The two of them had been tortured cruelly but had not given away anything. The professor, poor man, had been in agony since the morning and there was no hope for him, but Arta was still resisting. And since they had found nothing on her, they might soon set her free. But they had to hold her isolated for some time until her wounds were healed.

«There is a danger that the Germans may hand her over to the gendarmerie,» remarked Alert. «It seems that Major Jahja is particularly interested in her case and had demanded to question her himself. There is no doubt what he is aiming at...»

«Major Jahja is sick. He hasn't been out of his house all these days,» said Rexha optimistically.

«It doesn't mean very much, Rexha. He can do his business at home. They can bring her to him,» said Zef coldly.

«In his house?» Rexha addressed that question more to himself than to his comrades. «I don't see anything bad in that. On the contrary...»

Alert passed nervously his fingers through his hair and asked as if humorously:

«Do you intend to organize an action to release her?»

«Why not? You know that we have Sheja in

his house and she can do a lot of help to us. What do you say, comrade Zef?»

Zef lighted the cigarette he had been holding for some time, blew a cloud of smoke thoughtfully, then said:

«Why not?»

2

That night Alert could not sleep. Several times he switched on the light and saw his comrades sleeping, Zef on a portable bed and Rexha on the floor on two rags folded together. They had covered themselves with some sheets of Shkodra make and were breathing quietly, while he had thrown his jacket over his shoulders and was reclining on one of the two old sofas that were the main furniture of that low room with half rotten floor and ceiling that was threatening to fall down at any moment. He put out the light, lay down on the rugs beside Rexha and closed his eyes, but it was useless. He heard the town clock strike one, then two, then three... He had gone without sleep for nearly forty-eight hours, and a new day was approaching with its new preoccupations. He needed rest badly but the slightest noise chased his sleep away: at one time it was a cat fight in the yard, then the cry of a night bird on the trees by the Lana brook...

His thoughts were always returning to Arta. «She has been careless, indeed. Rexha has also been careless on that occasion at the roadblock and Rexha, is more mature... Bad luck, you can call it. But the important thing was her resistance under the tortures; she has been marvellous! Who knows what the devils have done

to her...» He imagined her all in blood, with her blouse torn to pieces, squirming and screaming like a bird caught in the claws of a falcon, that pecks it with its sharp beak on the hand, the eyes, the face...

Never before had Alert been in such a state, though his life had not been easy. He had considered himself impervious to personal or family misfortunes. Wasn't that which distinguished the true revolutionary from the ordinary man? First and foremost a revolutionary did not place his personal interest above those of the society, then his feelings were not confined to the narrow circle of his family and his relatives but were spread over the wide expanse of social life, the joys and sorrows of the people of his own nation and of the other countries. In short, all the thoughts and feelings of a revolutionary were dedicated to the revolution. These had always been Alert's convictions. Often, when he was a member of the «Zjarri» group, he had been shocked by the behaviour of his former comrades, even of some of the leaders, who allowed themselves to be so affected by some family setbacks that they disappeared for weeks in succession, neglecting their duties and the problems of the organization. Luckily, he had left all that behind him over a year before. But what was happening to him now? Why should he be so upset about Arta? Why didn't he feel the same about poor Professor Filipi who had suffered even more than Arta and was now almost dying? The fate of that man was even worse, since he was not a party member and was leaving behind him his children and a sick wife, from whom he had been living apart of late, in order to be more free to accomplish his patriotic duty.

No, it wasn't right on his part to take it so hard... In the darkness of the room he heard Zef groaning. He switched on the light to see if his comrade was awake, but he wasn't. Zef was sleeping, breathing again quietly as before. What was the cause of his groan?

«He too must have some sorrow but he does not show it. He also must be feeling the tragedy of Arta, the professor, Kopani and of so many others, and the drama of the entire people. Yes, Zef must feel all these sacrifices like his personal losses.»

His thoughts flew back to Arta. He had often teased her for her gentle nature, for her sensitive heart which ached even when a fledgeling fell out of its nest and was hurt. She envied Alert who was not easily moved and often mentioned it to him. «Lucky you to have such a strong heart; I can't manage it however hard I try.» And now? Had she changed all of a sudden?... He covered his eyes with his hand and abandoned himself to his sorrow sighing and whispering: «Arta, Arta...» Then she appeared to him as if rising from her grave, with her face and chest torn up, with blood clotted over her body, with her hair hanging in wisps over her face and the blouse in rags under which the flesh showed torn by pincers; a deep line like a furrow crossed her forehead. In her eyes, beautiful as ever, he could no longer see that ingenuous childish expression of a person who cannot respond to evil with evil. On the contrary, there was a dark light in them, flashing from time to time like the zigzag of the lightning from a dark cloud ready to pour its charge of hails.

Alert opened his arms expecting her to come to him, to lay her head on his chest and to weep until her tears soothed the pain in her heart... But she did not approach. On the contrary, she stepped back towards the door and raised her hand as if to protect her face crying: «No, Alert, no! I don't need your encouragement any more. And I don't want you to call me your Arta but the girl of the people who did her duty along with thousands of others. I don't even want you to pity me or to grieve for me, do you hear me? I am talking to you on behalf of thousands... We want your tears turn into bullets for the enemy...



Do you remember the tract Comrade Zef wrote when Kopani was killed? That is what we want!...»

Her voice broke suddenly, like the string of a guitar. Alert withdrew his hand from his eyes and raised himself to see her better, but Arta had vanished. In the white light of the lamp, the furniture of the room looked washed-out, colourless, and the room looked empty. Alert heard the even breathing of his comrades and realized that he had seen a dream.

## CHAPTER VI



The next day Professor Filipi died, but the news of his death came late. On that day Tirana was flooded with leaflets of different colours which announced the happy news about the Congress held in the south and about its important decisions. The democratic election of the Anti-fascist National-Liberation Council entirely from among the sons and daughters of the people and of the Anti-fascist Committee elected from the members of the Council and empowered to act as a government, fell like a thunderbolt on the leaders of the reactionary organizations, particularly on those of the Balli Kombëtar who had spent so much effort in trying to convince the people that the National Liberation movement was organized by foreigners. The followers of the Legality, who were convinced that whatever the

National Liberation movement might do (to them it was a foreign organization,) the throne belonged to King Zog, were maddened by the special decision of the Congress forbidding the return of Zog to Albania before the time when the people would decide the form of government they wanted.

To some of them, some of the decisions of the Congress, like those that proclaimed null and void all concessions given to foreign powers by any government of the past, seemed just and salutary. Naturally, they could not speak openly, but their whispering was enough to spoil the propaganda of the Balli Kombëtar and the Legality which was trying to ignore these decisions or to minimize their importance.

Eqrem Banka wrote a red-hot article for the paper «Bashkimi i Kombit» against these «manoeuvres of the reds», but the article was not published because the instructions from higher authorities were that the whole question should be ignored by the official press. To the editors of «Flamuri», organ of the Balli Kombëtar, and «Atdheu» organ of the Legality, a number of articles were sent which remained unpublished because most of them expressed the hope and conviction that the British and the Americans would never allow the dreams of the National-Liberation movement to come true, and that that «blunder would not be appreciated by the Germans.

«We are stuck badly,» sighed Mr. Banka and dropped with disgust his fountain pen on the crystal top of his desk.

Hajdar Bey, who happened to be there on another business (he had come for a stud bull which Eqrem Banka had promised to get for him through a friend), raised his scanty eyebrows and asked:

«Why?»

«Because the communists have already put us in a tight corner, Hajdar Bey, and we are not allowed to have our say,» complained Mr. Banka.

The bey pursued up his lips:

«I don't get your meaning.»

«It is clear enough. The facts speak for themselves. Do you call nothing that Congress of the National Liberation Front in the south? It has given solid support to the communists. They are on the rise now, and their propaganda is effective. They have left us behind, Hajdar Bey, far behind...»

Hajdar Bey's face, usually pink when freshly shaved, took a dark red hue. He raised his cane with the ivory handle representing a cat's head and hit the floor with it:

«I forbid you to talk such nonsense!» he shouted.

Eqrem Banka raised his hand and asked him to lower his voice, but the bey began to shout even louder:

«This is defeatism! You are playing in the hands of the reds. I don't care what the communists say. All I need is this, this...»

With his shaking hand he pulled out of his pocket the latest edition of the «Bashkimi i Kombit», which wrote about the success of the Operation in the South, and slammed it on the table:

«This is what I want, nothing else. And I see that you haven't even read it, you silly coward!»

He walked out tapping angrily his cane on the floor, holding his head high. Mr. Banka followed him to the head of the stairs begging him to come back but it was of no use. The bey didn't even turn his head.

«Quick, to Major Jahja!» he ordered his driver who was waiting for him behind the door.

«What about that bull?» asked just to please him his bodyguard, the «brave» Jaup Kërri, with his hand on the silver butt of the revolver, which he always hold ready on his belt.

«To the major, I am telling you! Stop your babble! So, you want a bull, oh? Let Eqrem Banka keep the bull to himself!»

Major Jahja had woken with fever and did not receive his father-in-law with his usual smile. The reason for his state of mind was first of all the short telephone call from the minister of internal affairs at two o'clock in the morning, when the major, after two sleepless nights, due to the unpleasant news he had received, had finally fallen in a deep sleep. Irritated by the ringing of the telephone, he had grabbed the receiver and, without asking who was at the other end, begun to shout angrily. Of course, he apologized when the minister had begun his «counter attack», but that did not placate His Excellency, who had ended with: «I will show you who I am»!

The major mentioned it to Hajdar Bey to justify his rather cold welcome of his father-in-law. Mr. Kasimati, who until then had not been at ease, threw his hat and his cane on the sofa and sat down on an easy chair by the bed of the sick major.

«Do you want me to intercede?» he asked with the tone of a man who was sure that a word from him was sufficient to make the minister not only give up his threats but even apologize to the major. «What do you say?»

«No, my dear, it is not necessary. The minister is my friend and he values me highly. But those days he isn't his usual self. We are in a situation which makes people go out of their minds. Difficult times have come about my dear, difficult...»

That was too much for Hajdar Bey. He bit his thumb with his teeth and stared vacantly at the figures of the Persian rug spread alongside the bed, completely at a loss. Several times he shrugged his shoulders and twisted his face in a grimace that impressed the major.

«It was very kind of you to come and see me »

said the major in an attempt at cordiality. «Is there anything I can do for you?»

The bey did not reply. He kept staring at the rug and moved from time to time his hands and his lips as if talking to himself.

«Or maybe you have got some news about Petrit?» the major continued.

Hajdar Bey got to his feet, raised his fists and shouted.

«You can go to the devil, all of you! You, and Petrit, and that ass Eqrem Banka, whom I have considered to be a courageous man. You are scared to death like so many rabbits, all of you. You ought to be ashamed of yourself. Tell me, can anything break the Germans? No....»

In vain Major Jahja tried to find the right word. Mr. Kasimati grabbed his hat and his cane and walked out repeating: «No, nothing can break the Germans!»

### 3

When he entered his house, Hajdar Bey noticed the fragments of a broken coffee cup which his wife had swept in a small heap in the corner of the corridor.

«You are pulling down the house, you!» he began to shout. Then he hung his hat and his cane, unbuttoned the jacket which seemed to be restraining his breathing, and let himself drop into the rococo easy chair that had once been the pride of the drawing room but was now relegated to the kitchen.

All that day his wife had been hearing unpleasant news, and she presumed correctly that this was the

source of Hajdar Bey's bad temper so she refrained herself from reacting.

«We aren't moving, no, not yet, no!» he continued. «I know what exile is. Here we are and here we stay. Let the cowards go away, let Major Jahja and Eqrem Banka run for their lives. Hajdar Bey is not repeating his mistake of 1924!»

Frightened by the husband's wild talk, the wife put her hands on her head and began to wail:

«What has happened? Poor me!»

«The coffee cup! Who broke it?»

«I did, my dear man, I broke it while serving coffee to the lawyer Meçe who had come to see you.»

«Meçe wanted to see me?» Hajdar Bey's face took a preoccupied expression. It shrunk and became thoughtful. Even his voice, usually high-pitched, and resonant, became meek and powerless. His question seemed addressed not to his wife but to himself.

«Yes, the lawyer Meçe,» explained his wife. «He was dressed so queerly that I hardly recognized him. He said he must see you about an urgent matter. He said: 'The Germans have sent for me but I won't give myself up before consulting your husband'. He seemed bitter as if you were to blame.»

The silence of Mr. Kasimati, who was looking aside to avoid his wife's eyes, appeared very suspicious to her.

«He is coming back. What shall I say to him when he comes?» she asked frightened.

«What will you say to him?» Hajdar bey jumped to his feet, caught her by the arms and began shaking her: «Let him eat the stew he himself has cooked. That is what you can say to him. And as for coming to my house to consult me, it is not necessary. There, at the kommandature, with Herr Ficht, there let them all come to consult me; Mr. Meçe, and Major Jahja, and Eqrem Banka, and all...»

Mrs. Kasimati covered her face with her hands and cried:

«Shame! Shame on you! Has a father-in-law ever been known to become the hangman of his daughter's husband?»

When she uncovered her eyes, Hajdar Bey was no longer there. A little later she heard the motor of his car.

4

The lawyer Ajet had not been at ease for two days. Several times he had gone to Dajti hotel staying there for a few minutes and, as none of his friends was to be seen, he came back home, though he knew that his sister was waiting there for him to start a quarrel. From the time she had treated so unbecomingly Afiz Turhani and Meçe, the lawyer Ajet had been worrying about her, but he had come to the conclusion that it was due to her high-strung nature and had given up trying to do anything about it. But at times she would ask questions which put Ajet in a very awkward position: «What will your attitude be if the communists come to power? Will you stay here or will you run away like many of your friends? «These questions were painful to him, particularly now that things in the south had taken an unfavourable turn and his friends not only did not come to see him but could not be seen even in the streets. Had anything special happened and they had left him in the dark? Or perhaps now they were all in a strait and everyone thought only of his own safety? «That is terrible, eh?»

His suspicions became stronger when a big car speeding, past him. He recognized Hajdar Bey's body-guard in the front seat and raised his hat respectfully.

The man glanced at him with a scowl and turned away his eyes, while Hajdar Bey paid no attention to him at all.

At Major Jahja's they told him that the major was at a meeting with some foreigners and wouldn't be back until evening. He thought he could call on Afiz Turhani at his house. He certainly would know something or could at least tell him where to find Mece and the others. But Afiz's house was too far on the Shëngjergji street; besides, a visit to him might give rise to suspicions. Yes, Afiz Turhani was well known as a sympathizer of the National Liberation movement. «No, no, it won't do. I am a fool», he thought. He changed his plan and directed his steps towards Eqrem Banka, to the officer of the «Bashkimi i Kombit».

«He went out just now,» said the vice-editor, a dark young man, with the bushy thick eyebrows who knew Ajet and, for unknown reasons, respected him highly. «Did you have any message for him, please?» he asked. «Perhaps I can help you.»

Ajet looked at him with gratitude. The face of the young man reminded him of the night meetings at his house a year and a half ago when they were organizing the «Balli Kombëtar»... How well he used to recite those love poems! They were so moving that even Hajdar Bey, who cared nothing about poetry, was moved by them.

He shook his head and gave his hand to the young man.

«You are very kind, Mr. Orfe. Thank you. But I had a personal business with Mr. Banka. I will come again later.»

«I don't think you will find him,» said the man regretfully. «He seemed very preoccupied and I don't believe he will come back today. Maybe he will be away for several days.»

«So?... Aha... I understand...» smiled Ajet as if to indicate that he knew where Banka had gone.



But when out in the street he began to ask himself: «What has happened?» and then concluded: «Every effect has its cause, of course.» He continued to think on his way home: «Can it be a general mobilization and people are hiding in their homes? «What soldiers can we make Mr. Banka and I? They are finished if they expect us to fight. We don't even know how to hold a gun... But why all this unrest?» He stood thinking for a while. «That, yes... The list with the fifty names... Certainly... Hajdar Bey and Banka were among the first on that list... They must have received other information, exchanged opinions and decided to make themselves scarce for a few days. It is a matter of their lives. And Meçe? No doubt he has been informed and has taken the necessary measures but nobody has informed me yet. Perhaps that means that my name is not in the list...»

From the window Emira saw her brother coming with a smile in his lips and ran down the stairs to meet him.

«Did you hear the news?» she asked.

Ajet was pleased that after her cold manner of the past days his sister had come to meet him at the door, as was her custom before, and did not notice the dark cloud in her eyes.

«What is it, Emira?» he asked without curiosity and held out his hands to embrace her.

«They have executed the lawyer Meçe!» said the girl. «Didn't you know about it?»

Ajet's arms remained raised halfway as he stared fascinated at the distressed face of his sister.

«The lawyer Meçe?» he pronounced with difficulty «Are you serious? Who executed him!»

«The Germans! Who else could have done it? Together with poor Jovan Myzeqari,» she said with tears in her eyes.

«The Germans?! It is unbelievable! You are driv-

ing me mad, my dear. Come in and tell me at once all about it, come.»

He caught the girl by the arm and drew her in the house. In the drawing room a mild soothing light was filtering through the curtains. Ajeta felt the refreshing atmosphere of his home and took a breath of relief. He swallowed quickly a glass of brandy, wiped his lips and sat down on a chair.

«The Germans! That is stragging!» he continued meditatively. «He was afraid of the others.»

«The others, the others! I know whom you mean,» sighed Emira. «But it seems that the list of the fifty names was just another lie.»

Ajeta got to his feet, drank another cup of brandy and turned to Emira:

«Tell me, first where did you learn all these things?»

«From very reliable sources,» replied the girl with an expression which left no doubt about her certainty.

«I want to know which are these reliable sources of yours,» said Ajeta angry and at the same time disappointed that his lawyer's diploma was of very little use in understanding political questions.

The girl looked aside and said nothing.

That week had been for Emira Velo a week of spiritual turmoil which grew in weight and intensity within each passing day. So much so that she began to feel that she was worth for nothing. Ever since the day of that confusing meeting when the social democrats were left sucking their fingers, she had understood that things were not as she had for a long time imagined. She was particularly disappointed that Mr. Meçe, whom Mithat Frashëri had described as a man of caliber, had remained completely confounded.

The killing of her uncle and the ridiculous comments of the Balli at which even the Ballists laughed, were enough to disgust her. Then her conversation with that double dealer, Afiz Turhani, who was playing with Ajet and Meçe as with street urchins, was even worse. True, Emira had not been upset so much by the revolting attitude of Azis as by the fear that the two lawyers had shown before that bearded man that the tract of the Balli about Galip Bey had been written by Eqrem Banka, directly instructed by Mithat Bey. Why should Mithat Bey go so far as to entrust the propaganda of the Balli Kombëtar to a discredited man like Eqrem Banka who was known by everybody as an agent of the Germans? All these things proved that the nationalist cause had fallen so low, that the leaders of the Balli and the social democrats were not the «men of caliber» she had considered them to be, and that even the aureole of Mithat Frashëri as the greatest patriot of Albania was marred by black smoke. «Too bad, too bad! And now these portents of misfortune following one after another! The other day, yesterday even, all what was declared about the Operation in the South by the nationalists themselves confirms the thesis of the communists. It came to nothing, the plan on which Mithat Bey had reposed all his hopes, and now everybody is searching a way to save his life. What a beautiful picture, eh! Now is Qemal Orhanaj laughing at us all right... The communists formed their government with their own people, with Albanians. They formed it right under the eyes of the British and American missions. What does that mean? It means that we are completely unbalanced and each of us is playing a separate tune, like my brother now.»

Ajet was sitting silent, staring vacantly and racking his mind to find a logical explanation of the incongruous sequence of events that was getting more and more entangled. He could find no logic, particularly in

the unexpected execution of the lawyer Meçe. It made him fear for himself since his points of view were quite similar to those of Mr. Meçe. Recently they had even ironed out those few points on which they differed. Why should they kill Meçe and not him? And just now Ajeta was not sure where he was to place himself, with the Ballists or with the social democrats... or?...

«Listen, Emira,» he turned to his sister. «Will you listen to me now?» His voice was uncertain and hesitant like that of a man who is pleading for something which he is almost sure he won't obtain.

Emira looked at him surprised and somewhat alarmed.

«Go on please. I will listen to you of course. You are my brother, the closest person I have in this world.»

«Very well. You see?» Ajeta smiled with relief. «This is the kind of brotherly harmony that everyone wishes to find, first in his home, then in his country. But for some time, my dear Emira, we don't seem to agree with each other perfectly. Or am I wrong? And this is detrimental, first of all, to the family then to the nation. That is how I see it, at least. Tell me now frankly, with no reserve, as to your elder brother, as sincerely as you have always spoken to me in the past, why have you changed so much since that meeting?»

He waited for his sister to say something, but she kept her eyes lowered and was silent.

«You don't speak, eh?» he continued. «Then let me tell you what I think... For some time I have had my suspicions about a matter which you know very well. But I have not manifested them. Now I will ask you openly: have you broken with Qemal Orhanaj or do you still maintain your relations with him?»

Emira felt as if she had received a hard blow. She

raised her eyes and fixed the eyes on her brother holding her breath for a few seconds.

«Way should that upset you? If it comes to that, I have nothing against it,» he tried to encourage her, convinced by her behaviour that he had guessed correctly.

The girl straightened up, pushed back the hair that had fallen over one side of her face and said with a steady voice:

«So you have nothing against it? That is queer! Can it be true? You used to hate that man so much that...»

«That I influenced you to change your feeling... Is that what you were going to say? Yes. I hated him, and I may still hate him. But this is another matter, Emira. Do you understand me? The situation is getting every day more complicated, as you can see for yourself. Wouldn't it be advisable to find a way out and make it up with the communists?»

A shadow of despair fell on Emira's face. The proposal she had just heard was shameful, nauseating. It hurt her self-respect. In the man who sat in front of her she no longer saw her brother, the lawyer Ajeta, the tall handsome man admired by all the intellectuals, with whom she had been proud to go for a walk, to the cinema or on visits to their friends. Now she saw quite another man, a stranger, a man with contracted body, with a washed-out face, with a feeble mind, who did not know what he was saying and who out of fear had reached such a low degree of baseness that he was prepared to take advantage of his sister's love to secure his safety.

She felt so outraged that even slapping his face would not have satisfied her, and that was a thing that shouldn't be done.

She had an impulse to tell him outright and in the crudest terms what she thought of him, but that

would only provoke a quarrel between them and she was in no mood for quarrelling.

She clenched her teeth instead, caught her head with her hands and whispered:

«This is the limit, the limit!...»

## CHAPTER VII

### I

Arta was handed over to the gendarmery. This happened two days after Professor Filipi's death, about which Arta had not yet heard. At the gendarmerie, to her surprise, Arta was not questioned. They locked her alone in a small room, which was like a prison cell and very damp, but had a small barred window which let some light enter and through which she could see the sky. Besides, they had put an iron bed in the room with a straw mattress and a soldier's blanket, as well as a small table by the bed. When they locked the door, she threw herself on the bed and felt so exhausted that she would not have attempted to run away even if she were given the chance. A little later she heard the guard unlock the door but could not see him. He let in a short dark woman wearing a short jacket and çitjane<sup>1</sup> and a white veil covering

---

1) Çitjane — long loose trousers

her head. Without saying «good morning» or «good evening», the woman left on the table a tray with the prisoner's ration of bread and soup and vanished like a shadow.

Arta watched her with curiosity and would like to talk to her, but the woman gave her no opportunity. Behind the door the guard used from time to time to cough to indicate that he was there and that he could hear any word exchanged between the prisoner and the woman. Once, when the woman stopped to gather some pieces of bread that had fallen off the tray, the man called her with his harsh voice: «Come on, Dije, you are taking too much time.» The woman left the pieces of bread where they were and hurried out.

«So, her name is Dije,» said Arta to herself.

In the evening the guard came in together with Dije. He had a German automatic slung over his shoulder and a short chain with two small handcuffs on both ends in his hand. Horrified, she recognized the Corporal Noga who had come to manacle her. But why? Usually they did that when they took the prisoners out to question them or to shoot them. She felt an emptiness in her breast, like that day when they arrested her, and was too weak to say a word. She suspected they were going to shoot her but manifested no emotion not only because she did not want to appear weak, but because she had been so much terrified by the tortures in the Gestapo basement that she now preferred better die than start again from the beginning, which would certainly drive her mad.

She got to her feet and tended her hands. The corporal began to put the handcuffs on them, while Dije stood looking thoughtfully not at her face but at the parts where her flesh could be seen through the holes of her torn blouse. Arta glanced at her and had the impression that the woman was pitying her and saying to herself: «You are very young, poor girl!

Do you know where they are taking you to, poor soul...?» But Artá made an effort to keep her body straight and walked behind the woman. The corporal followed holding the automatic in his hands.

When she was out, Artá was surprised to see no people around. Even the only guard standing before the iron door with the strap of his cap under his chin did not stir from his place but looked at Artá sullenly and motioned with his head to the woman to pass. They passed him as they were: Dije leading the way, Artá following her and the corporal behind them. Artá's doubts were aroused again: they could not be taking her to be executed with a single guard. And that woman, who could be nothing but a poor servant earning her bread by sweeping and washing the offices of the gendarmerie, what could she have to do with the whole business? No, no! They were not going to shoot her or torture her but they were leading her to something else, perhaps to something worse.

She stopped thinking about these things and quickened her steps behind the woman. In the street behind the Kommandature there was no movement, although the weather was fine and the moon was shining brightly above the Dajti mountain from a sky studded with stars. From time to time, from the large street a little way off came the lonely steps of some soldiers, or the noise of a motorcycle, which faded away gradually. Then she remembered that this was the curfew hour when only those specially authorized could be seen in the streets. What about Dije? Was she authorized? Certainly she was, since she worked at the gendarmerie. «The gendarmerie!» she murmured to herself. Only now it came to her mind that the commander of the gendarmerie was that notorious criminal Jahja. She had never seen the major, but she had heard a lot about him. «He is the man of all vices, the worst murderer...» she thought. «Píciruku ought to have shot him that day, before the eyes of his wife...»



They hadn't gone ten paces from the door, when a young girl, brown and dressed like Dije, appeared in front of them. She had a thin face with big black eyes slightly slanting and a somewhat prominent forehead.

«Where have you been to, Sheje? You are late,» said Corporal Noga smiling.

«You are late, not I. I have been waiting for you in the guard-room for the last half hour,» replied the girl. «And you, my aunt, isn't it too late for you?» she asked Dije.

«Your aunt has her house right here, in that little street. She can go home now,» said the corporal. «You and I should be sufficient to accompany the young lady... What do you say?»

«Yes, sir! ... Only quick, because the major may not like it... We are late as it is...»

The girl took Dije's place in front of Arta and the corporal and hurried down the street.

They walked five minutes without exchanging a word. The girl noticed that Arta was walking with difficulty and made a sign to the corporal to slow down.

That gesture of the girl made a good impression on Arta, but her words about the «major» had the opposite effect, so that now she did not know what to think. «They are taking me to him, it is clear. Now, Arta, you will have to show what stuff you are made of, because one dies only once.» That was her last clear thought, all the rest was like mist. She no longer felt the pain in her legs, nor the lights in the street, nor the noises...

They had been walking quite a long way by now. The lights were getting less frequent. From the Durrës street they had turned into another street and then into a narrow passage which reminded her about something but she had no time to think what it was.

«Halt!» came the cry of a guard just as they were in the passage. The two girls stopped.

The corporal showed the guards a paper. The guard came closer, lit his electric torch, looked at the paper without touching it, then at the girls, then asked something.

«To Major Jahja,» replied the corporal in a whisper.

«To Major Jahja?» asked the guard surprised. That's funny. Nobody has notified me about it... I have my responsibilities here.»

Arta was stunned. That voice was familiar to her. She felt numb and weak all of a sudden, she could not take her breath and her eyes were so clouded that she could not distinguish the silhouettes of the people around her. Yes, the voice was familiar and dear to her... «But is it possible, or am I dreaming?» she thought.

«I don't know about that,» reported the corporal. «I have my orders and that should be enough.»

«You are right, Mister corporal, quite right! But what will I tell the oberleutenant who has put me here? However, the major's house is right here around the corner, so I will come with you in case...»

The corporal laughed and nodded. «All right!»

As they went deeper into the half-darkness of the street, two more guards appeared and approached.

«These are two of our men,» said the guard. The corporal raised once more his hand to show the paper, but was given no chance.

Two powerful hands grabbed him by the arms while another hand pushed a plug of rags into his gaping mouth, fastening it with a black strap, while a rope immobilized his arms and his legs. The two comrades lifted him, passed him over a breach in the wall and ran with him across the gardens.

«Quick, after them! Do you see what is going on now?» whispered Alert to Arta touching her shoulder.

Arta glanced at the other girl who was standing watching calmly like a person who knows perfectly well what she has to do. She nodded her head in sign of greeting and, when the other girl nodded back, she followed after her comrades. Alert came a few paces behind her.

A little further in the gardens they joined the two comrades who had set the corporal on the ground by a tree and were searching him taking from him his revolver, the belt of cartridges and finally a small key tied on a string.

«Here he has it, the dog!» hissed one of them through his teeth. He snatched the key and turned to Arta.

«Come here and... congratulations,» he whispered and immediately freed her hands from the handcuffs.

«Rexha!» cried Arta, and caught him in her arms. Then she turned to Alert. «What are you going to do with this devil?»

«We have found a place for him, don't bother.»

«Will you try him?»

«We will see.»

«But then what...»

Alert did not let her continue. He had reached the foot of the wall by a tree, while Rexha, who had taken over the direction of the «difficult operation» started the proceedings. He told the comrades to set down their charge on the ground by the wall then the three comrades whispered something among themselves. The third man climbed up the tree and then crossed to the wall. He threw a rope over a branch that ran parallel with the wall and over the wall in such a way that the longer end passed over the outer side and the shorter hang this side of the wall. Rexha

tied the shorter end of the rope round the body of the corporal. Then the other man jumped down on the other side of the wall and began to pull the rope from that side. The body of the corporal began to rise slowly as being lifted by a pulley.

«That is fine! Steady now!» said Rexha helping up the strapped-up body of the quisling. Alert came to his aid and in two minutes they had raised him to the top of the wall. They rolled him slowly until the body of the corporal was lying at Bimi's feet on the other side. Then the others went over the wall and found themselves on the other side, too.

«You have a clever member in your cell,» Rexha said to Arta.

«Whom do you mean?»

«Bimi. Didn't you know him? It was he who invented the rope and the pulley.»

«Bimi!» cried the girl. «That is really clever of him!»

«Be careful, comrades, there is an open ditch somewhere here,» came a warning from Bimi who led the way.

## 2

The corporal and the two gendarmes who were standing on guard at the major's house let Sheje in as a person belonging to the family. She went straight to the kitchen, took off her jacket and shoes, put on a white apron and an old pair of slippers and began her usual work.

The major's wife, who came down herself to pre-

pare the supper, was surprised when she saw her washing the dishes.

«You already here?» she asked.

«Yes, madam.»

«And corporal Noga, where did he go?»

«I don't know, madam. Isn't he back yet?»

«What are you talking about, you fool. It is more than an hour that the major is waiting for him.»

Sheja pursed her lips perplexed.

«He left on a car, together with that arrested girl. We walked together the first part of the way, then a car overtook us. There were two men in it, so there was no place for me... Funny he isn't back yet. The major will have a word for him when he comes, I am sure.»

«The clumsy idiot!» said the angry lady.

Sheja looked at her with a significant smile.

«You are quite right madam. That corporal had been paying too much attention to his black looks of late. I have seen him with my own eyes... God forbid he should hear me... She put her hand over her mouth implying that the words had escaped her against her will.

\*  
\*   \*  
\*

Major Jahja heard his wife tell him what Sheja had said without giving it much importance. But when he rang up the Command and was told that the corporal and the arrested girl had left half an hour ago he began to be really worried. «Can that corporal be such a big fool? No, he wouldn't dare go so far. He was queer about women, of course, but he knew he would risk his head if he did such a thing. It flashed through his mind that this could be a trick of the

communists, but he dismissed the thought. They would not dare take such a risk in the middle of the town and at a time when the Germans had declared that they would kill a hundred for one. Besides why should they undertake such an action for a simple girl? If it were for one of the leaders, of those «terrible» ones, yes. But for a girl who was nobody... Impossible!»

But there was something which still disturbed him. «A woman is able to outwit the devil himself. Could that girl have turned Corporal Noga's head?» He stood weighing the chances. «Well, she was a pretty girl.... The corporal had accosted her once before, but she had sent him packing. Could he have taken advantage of this new opportunity? Or... It was he who had signalled her to the Germans the first time. And when they drew nothing from her and were going to release her, it was he who had suggested that she should be brought to me. Yes, it was him, the fool! He is making a big mistake if he thinks he can have her for himself... Otherwise I won't be called Major Jahja any more!»

Again he grabbed the telephone receiver. The operator replied immediately, but the major was undecided. He wanted to ask many questions and could not decide whom to call first. Was it reasonable to raise an alarm before making sure what had really happened? Who knows what people would think of him? Then there was his excellency, the minister who had been so nasty about that professor who had died without giving away anything... «No, no. I must not make a row of it. I must try another way with the corporal. He has nowhere to go with that girl and, by God, she will be mine!»

To the operator's question «What number, please?» he replied, «No, I don't want anybody» and dropped the receiver in its place.

Corporal Noga had never thought that one day he would be asked to answer for what he had done during his career. The comrades knew little about his crimes but they drew easily from him more than they expected. The sight of Arta, with her death-pale face and the evident signs of torture on her body, filled him with terror. His first word when they freed his mouth was «Mercy!» Then he promised to tell them everything and to put himself entirely at their disposal for anything.

Alert used all his skill to make him reveal his secrets and all he had done, particularly since the notorious fourth of February massacre in which the corporal had participated directly and should know who had organized it. Without denying his part in it, the corporal declared that Major Jahja, «who was born for such indignities,» had planned the action together with the Germans. The corporal, in his attempts to justify himself, said that he came from a poor family and that only necessity had made him join the Italian militia. He admitted his part in the big operation against Peza but he swore that he had not set fire on any house and had killed nobody. He was guilty of having fired against the partisans at Vlora, in the battle of Gjorm in 1942, but he had been encircled by partisans wearing caps with red stars on them and he had taken them for Greeks.

«Weren't they Greeks?» asked Alert smiling.

«No, sir. I was sorry when I found it out, but it was too late. They had deceived us, sir, they had lied to us. They were big liars, Mustafa Kruja and Halil Alia... In the gendarmery, yes, I have done some bad things...»

He had been ordered by the major to «help» the Kosova regiment in the massacres of the Fourth of

February. The major had ordered him to shoot a man whom they called the «Hodja» and had thrown his body in the Lana Brook. But for that the corporal felt no regret since that Hodja had been the cause of the arrest of a cousin of the major's 'the daughter of his uncle, who had gone with the partisans and had shamed the whole family. With hesitation the corporal began to tell about another crime he had committed together with his friend, sergeant Braho, at Rrapi i Trishtit. It was about a communist named Lake, who, before they shot him, had insulted them calling them «traitors», and instead of shooting him they had... He noticed that Alert's face darkened and did not dare tell how they had killed the man. But the comrades knew all about it.

«For one thing you must take my word,» the corporal tried to justify himself. «For all these things major Jahja is to blame. You know very well who he is... And I take it on myself to do away with him if you spare my life.»

His face had grown pale and he was breathing in gasps. Drops of perspiration covered his forehead and ran down his bare chest. The cellar in which they had brought him was low and narrow and from its ceiling hung large dusty cobwebs, which threw fantastic shadows on the walls. It smelled of mould and the smoke of the oil lamp was burning their throats.

Alert looked at Arta, who was on the verge of fainting, and opened the door. A wave of fresh air filled the cellar, and the people in it felt better.

\*  
\*  
\*

Outside, Rexha and Bimi were keeping watch. From time to time they looked at the old two-storied house where the inquest was taking place. It looked like a small castle with its venetian roof and the large



barred windows, dark and silent like the windows of an abandoned house. It was not the first time that this house was used as an illegal base. Rexha knew well its owner, Father Sula, the old sick man who surprisingly had survived the terrible tortures and was now in jail together with the young revolutionaries, while his family had escaped to the mountains leaving behind the house and everything that was in it. Rexha also knew the complicated past of the old man and wondered why such a man had joined together with his family the great movement of the people which aimed not only at liberating the country from foreign occupation but also at bringing down that parasitic class which, like Father Sula himself, had accumulated land and built big houses with the sweat of the oppressed.

While thinking about these things, Rexha at the same time was keeping an eye on the small street that was the only way from which the enemy could reach the high wall surrounding the house.

On the other side of the wall, by a small door that led to the garden, stood Bimi. He was sure that the enemy could not approach the house from that side, and from time to time ran to exchange a few words with Rexha and was back again at his post.

Inside, Alert and Arta were continuing the interrogation. The crimes the corporal had admitted were more than sufficient for conviction, but the information he was giving made it worth while to continue the interrogation. The corporal took a deep breath and went on: «I have another thing to add, yes, I have to tell you something about a certain Mr. Banka whom you know. He lives at Lapraka. The major and the Kommandature do not trust him, but he pretends to sympathize with the communists and is dangerous for you. His daughter is engaged to be married to a boy of a communist family which lives in the neighbourhood. We know that family but have not yet arrested

them, 'for particular reasons', as the major put it... The facts about that family are in dossier Nr. 17 of the District Command and that dossier is kept in a safe by the major or lieutenant Dika.»

«Anything else?» asked Alert.

The corporal stood for a moment thinking.

«What else? I don't know what else. I could tell you... Ah, yes! I almost forgot it... When we arrested that gentleman,» he turned to Arta, «eh, how much he suffered, the poor man! But god is my testimony that I was not to blame in his case. It was all the fault of Corporal Braho who lives on the same street and, I don't know by what means, had noticed that the professor used to receive communists in his house. I happened to mention it one day to the ober-leutenant and he asked me to take him to the professor... He was a man, that professor. I have rarely seen others like him. They even plucked out his eyes in the end... But they could draw not a word from him. Then they buried him while he was not quite dead yet... Eh, what could one do?... They were bad criminals, those of the Gestapo...»

The corporal was watching stealthily Arta, who was weeping.

«Where...» she asked with broken voice, «Where did they bury him?»

«In a well by the wall, behind the Gestapo... Then they filled up the well with earth and stones.»

«Enough, you criminal!» cried Alert angrily. Then he took the plug of rags and put it back in the corporal's mouth.» «Enough! enough!» Then he turned to Arta and continued: «We shall find a suitable grave for this hyena here, more terrible than that of our comrade. Yes, I will see to it myself...»

He left the room and ran out. By the light of the moon which was setting slowly over the western horizon he looked at his watch. There were still two more hours before dawn.

Although Major Jahja wanted to hush up the affair of the «escape» of Corporal Noga, the news spread like wildfire. Then roadblocks on all the roads going out from Tirana assured that no military car with an arrested girl had been going out of the town. The next day the gendarmerie received some unconfirmed reports that the corporal had been seen in Lapraka dressed in civilian clothes and in the company of a pretty girl. Major Jahja went almost mad when he heard about it. He could not believe that his trusted corporal could commit such a treachery, yet he could not exclude it completely. There could be some truth in it. Corporal Noga was capable of finding a safe hiding place where neither the gendarmerie nor the communists could find him. The major remembered that in Lapraka lived that communist family about which he himself had given «secret» instructions not to be disturbed, and Corporal Noga knew them well. The corporal could take advantage of it, particularly since he was accompanied by that girl, who although might not be a communist, after what she had gone through at the Gestapo must have won the sympathy of the communists... For one or two days, until he found a better place, the corporal could stay with them... And it would be no surprise if he gave them some inside information about the gendarmerie...» The swine! But they call me Major Jahja, and perhaps I know one or two tricks that he doesn't even suspect».

He clenched his teeth and reached for the telephone. But then he changed his mind. Orders of that kind were not given by telephone. No. The search should be conducted in the greatest possible secrecy. Orders given by telephone could be overheard by some undesirable ear. He called one of the guards standing before his house and asked him:

«Do you know what a secret mission means?»

The guard stood at attention.

«Yes sir!»

«You will find Lieutenant Dika at his house, in his office or wherever he may be. And you will tell him...» he lowered his voice. «You will tell him that Major Jahja orders him to take with him some of the most reliable gendarmes, immediately and without letting anyone hear anything about it. He must divide them into two groups, the one under his command, the other under that of Ensign Lezha... Do you understand?»

«Yes sir!»

«They must go unexpectedly and after surrounding the house, enter into the family of the dossier Nr. 17.»

The guard opened his eyes embarrassed.

«The dossier Nr. 17, I am telling you, you silly ass!» the major glared at him threateningly. «Can't you remember that?»

«The dossier Nr. 17,» repeated the guard.

«...and to arrest...or shoot at the slightest sign of resistance, any person that he finds there who does not belong to the family. You got me?...Go along now. Wake the driver and go by car!»

Major Jahja dozed off in a light drowse at half past two after midnight. It came over him just as he was sitting in his easy chair with his jacket thrown over his shoulders. Only a quarter of an hour later he woke up from a frightening dream. His face, instead of round and with slightly prominent forehead, had become long and narrow... and it was not made of flesh and bones but of hard tin-plate... and a big iron hammer was banging it with a deafening noise. He opened his eyes and pressed his temples with his hands. His wife was sleeping quietly in the bed, but the telephone was ringing persistently.

«Am I crazy!» he said when he came to himself and ran to the telephone.

«Who it is?» he asked yawning.

«Uh, at least!» he heard Lieutenant Dika's voice.

«Good news, Major, good news!»

Major Jahja pretended indifference.

«What news can you have that I don't know,» he said importantly. «Did you imagine I had made my plans on nothing?»

«By no means, major, no! But...»

«There is no 'but' about it, tell me quick, did you catch him alive or... kaput?»

«Kaput, major»

«Why? Did the corporal try to resist?»

«The corporal? I don't understand you. What corporal?»

«Corporal Noga! Wasn't it him you were talking about?»

«No, no, please. You have got me wrong.»

The major raised his head angrily:

«What! What were you talking about then?»

«About a big game, major, a game whose skin alone is priced at more than 10,000 gold francs. A communist who wanted to slander you and endanger your life. Don't you remember?»

The major's eyes sparkled. «Was it possible? Could that be true? Oh, this is wonderful! The minister himself will be obliged to withdraw his insults he addressed to me the other night.»

«Are you sure, Lieutenant?» he asked excitedly.

«There can be no doubt about it,» Lieutenant Dika replied importantly. «I will give you all the details later. We did not find the rebel in the house you suspected but in another house which I had the intuition to search... And that will be recorded I hope as a modest merit of mine. Don't I deserve it? Ha, ha, ha! Here I have his false identity card with his photo... original! And a letter, too, he has written to his girl...

a matter of jealousy. It is written in his own handwriting and signed by him with his pseudonym: PICI-RUKU!

## CHAPTER VIII

### 1

Zef Moisiu passed a restless night waiting for the morning to bring him news about the outcome of the important action.

He got up, washed himself and put in order the couch on which he had slept. He stood for a moment behind the window and looked at the yard, then picked up a book that had been lying for a long time in a corner of the couch. On the front page was the portrait of Benito Mussolini to which someone had blackened the eyes with a pencil and lengthened the ears like those of a donkey.

«My daughter Drita has done that, and it brought us much trouble,» explained the landlady, Mother Zela, who was doing the room and watching him.

«What happened?»

«The carabinieri made a big fuss over it. They locked the girl up for twenty days. She was only fourteen at that time...»

Someone knocked at the street door and Zef made

a move to go out and see who it was but the woman stopped him.

«Don't bother,» she said. «Drita will open the door. It must be that scape grace Deko.»

Drita was already at the door and opened it without asking who was knocking. She let in Bimi who was wearing peasant's clothes and the same old big boots of the day before.

«It isn't Deko,» said the old woman as she looked from the window. «Do you know that man?»

«I know him, don't worry, replied Zef and went out to meet the newcomer. Bimi noticed Zef's haggard face and sleepless eyes and suspected that something unpleasant had happened.

«Come on, Bimi, tell me, how did it come off?» asked Zef.

«Oh it was a beauty! And you here? You don't look well...»

Zef pulled himself up and relaxed.

«We here? Yes. We have had our troubles, too. First, I ran out of cigarettes, then Mother Zela brought the coffee at four o'clock, and Drita had not yet prepared her report... But seriously, didn't anything unexpected happen to you?»

«Nothing, Comrade Zef. On the contrary, everything went smoothly like clockwork. Better than we expected. The corporal sends you his best regards from the other world, while the major is certainly convinced that he has betrayed him... As for Arta, it is true that only a dram of life had remained in her, but we took her to a good base, brought a doctor to see her, and he assured us that she would be all right in no time... Rexha and Alert will be here at noon.

There was nothing in the papers about Piciruku's death. But the telephones rang continually, and the gendarmes and mercenaries, as if instructed particularly, talked of nothing else but the killing of «that dangerous communist whom the government had been wanting for more than three months.» It had been the merit of the Command of the gendarmeri and of Major Jahja Kosova personally, who had long been preparing a plan that had astonished the German officers of the Kommandanture, who until then had had little consideration for the Albanian major. The minister of internal affairs himself had called on the major and given instructions on that «the example of courage and enterprise shown by Major Jahja should be communicated by a special circular to all the state organs of the country.»

Everybody added something to the sensational news. Lieutenant Dika, who was the executor of the major's plan had explained that the man they had killed was not an ordinary communist but «one of the leaders without whom the National Liberation movement could not stand on its feet». The news brought much relief to Hajdar Bey, who immediately started on a round of visits to his friends. His joy made him forget his bad feelings towards Eqrem Banka and Major Jahja, whose names he had not mentioned for the last two days. His first words to all those whom he honoured with his visit were that his predictions had come true and that «the days of the reds were numbered.» He proudly raised his head every time his listeners agreed with him. Only «the Father of the Nation» had reacted coldly, not that he did not appreciate the good news, but he did not approve of Mr. Kasimati's excess of enthusiasm.



«Don't you find it exceptional?» asked Hajdar Bey, frustrated.»

«Not to that extent, Hajdar Bey, not to that extent ... The communists are like the hydra; for every head you cut off, two new ones sprout...

«No!»

«That is the truth, Hajdar Bey. We must not have any illusions about it. We must have a realistic view of the situation. And we must not make too much fuss over a minor success like this one. We are talking *entre nous*... Mithat Bey winked nervously, trying to overcome his stutter and continued: «Didn't you know that the big ones aren't in Tirana these days? They have all gone to the South, to the congress... Haven't you heard about their congress?... They have set up their government, the imbeciles... Do you think it is as simple as that that the profanes should prove wiser than the nation's intelligentsia? No, by no means. Who has been teaching them all their tricks? To us it is a long known fact. The foreign agents have not come here to admire the beauty of the Albanians. But can you convince the clumsy peasants who have been promised a communist paradise?»

Mr. Kasimati, with his hands locked together, his eyes half closed and his neck bent a little to one side, was staring at Mithat Bey as a pupil at teacher. He had not expected Mithat Bey to give so much importance to that devil of a Congress of the Communists and their government. He had been one of the first to learn about it, but the news had not spoiled his sleep. He had laughed when Ajeta Velo had asked him what he thought of it and, despite the high esteem he always had had for his family, he had addressed him as a child: «You are talking nonsense, Ajeta. It is a congress of ragamuffins, after all, and there is nothing in it. Do you imagine that America and England will give their consent to that madness without asking Mithat Bey's opinion about it?»

But now it seemed that the matter was not as simple as he thought it to be, and Mithat Bey himself was taking it seriously. What was to be done now?

He freed his hands, straightened his body and, seeing that Mithat bey pursed his lips and began to drum with his fingers on the table — a sign that he had nothing to say, asked:

«And we, Mithat Bey, why didn't we think of having a congress of our own earlier?»

«We did think of it, my dear.»

«Then why didn't we have it?»

Mithat Bey looked at him with commiseration:

«Because not everybody is as sincere as you are...»

Pleased by the compliment, Mr. Kasimati shook his head and smiled.

«I am only doing my duty,» he said modestly.

«You are doing your duty but the others aren't. You know the pretensions of the Legalists, the Social-democrats and the rest of them... Every one of them pretends to be at the head... How can unity be achieved in these conditions? It is impossible. Once again the saying of a friend of mine seems to come true: 'It is easier to hold a handful of flees in your hand than a handful of Albanians together.' We have made it all too easy for the communists, Hajdar Bey. That is the source of all our setbacks and of the latest discomfiture we suffered in the South. I suppose you know about it...»

«No. What discomfiture?» asked Hajdar Bey aghast.

«A shame that the waters of the ocean cannot wash!... More than three hundred men threw down their arms and ran... But it is not the shame that worries me, my dear. It is something else: the Germans have lost their confidence in us, and that cannot fail to have its consequences. I felt it the other day at your house in the few words I exchanged with major Ficht. You remember?... That affair too between Mr. Meçe and that other fellow who caused him to be executed

is a consequence of their attitude. The Germans don't want to know anything about the Balli, the Legality or the Social-democrats. We are all equal in their eyes. And they don't even care to know what our differences are.»

Mithat Bey raised his head and looked thoughtfully at the ceiling. Then he spoke again.

«I am talking to you openly now...there is only one Albanian who can be taken seriously by the Germans, and that is you, Hajdar Bey...Can you arrange a personal meeting with general Fitstun? It would be a great thing you can do for the nation in this critical moment. The general will receive you on your personal merit and also as the father of Captain Petrit for whom, as far as I know, he has a particular sympathy. What do you say?»

Mithat Bey pronounced the last words stuttering more than usual, and that made a deep impression on Mr. Kasimati, who pulled out his handkerchief and passed it over his forehead. But Mithat Bey could not tell from his face, now smiling now frowning, whether Mr. Kasimati was pleased by the consideration «the head of nationalism» was showing him, or whether he was apprehensive about the delicate mission he was asked to undertake. In any case, his refusal would be a blow against the nation. Despite the short time he had at his disposal, Hajdar bey, weighed carefully the pros and cons of the matter and decided that he was obliged to do his duty as a true nationalist. He even added that he did not expect to gain any personal advantage from it, — at most the post of minister of defence in the future government, and that he was doing it as an obligation towards his country and Mithat Bey.

The leader took Hajdar Bey's hand in both his and saw him out two steps beyond the door, a thing he had never done with any other person.

«A great man», said Mr. Kasimati to himself, while his «Fiat» car, heated from staving nearly two hours in the sun, streaked off along the boulevard.

At the square of the Ministries the driver, who had received no instructions from his master, swung the car to the right towards Hajdar Bey's house.

«Where are you going?» shouted Hajdar Bey. — Straight! Straight to the general!... And you, Kerri, what are you staring at?» he snapped at his bodyguard.

Jaup Kerri, who had been thinking of nothing in particular, started as if awakened from sleep and asked:

«To general Fitstun, you mean, Hajdar Bey?»

«Yes.»

«It is impossible!»

«Why is it impossible?»

«It is impossible, Bey! I know it well. Today the general is in such a state that he could murder his own father. They say he is so angry that he doesn't want to see anybody.»

Hajdar Bey remained stunned for a moment staring at his bodyguard who was talking so unconcernedly about such a terrible matter.

«What am I to do now?» he muttered with lips that could hardly move.

— Home... There is nowhere else we can go,» replied Kerri, deciding for his master.

## CHAPTER IX

### 1

Of the communists, the first to learn about Piciruku's death was Deko. It was Emira Velo who gave him the news in the afternoon, when he went to her, as he had promised, to give her a communist tract which had, among others, a comment on the execution of Galip Bey.

She invited Deko to sit down and, without returning his greeting, asked him if he had heard a bad news that morning.

«No? What news?» asked Deko calmly.

The girl looked in his eyes to make sure that he really did not know anything about it and began with circumspection:

«They say somebody was killed at Lapraka... A young fellow... Small and with a thin face... A communist, it seems... He was killed before he could react.

«I have heard nothing about it,» said the boy. He knew that the Party had several bases at Lapraka and that something could happen there at any time, but it could not concern Piciruku who had told him that he was going to Peza and would stay there for a long period.

«Didn't they tell you his name?» asked the boy. «His name?» She shook her head and half closed her eyes. «No, the communists don't use names, but pseudonyms. They mentioned something like «Piciruku», but...»

The face of the boy darkened. She noticed the change and asked:

«Have you ever heard that name?»

«I don't remember,» said Deko looking aside and, putting his shaking hands in his pockets, continued: «You are right, miss, that can't be his real name.»

«It is that communist who pushed Major Jahja into the ditch. Don't you remember the government poster with his photograph?»

Deko pretended to be reflecting.

«Yes... I remember... It was a face I had never seen before.»

«I did not have the chance to see it because the communists had taken it off within a few minutes. And I wanted very much to see it, you know why?»

The boy did not reply. He was trying to keep his attention on what Emira was saying, although he realized that all further talk had become useless. «How could Piciruku fall into a trap like that?» he thought. «Was he a man to be caught unawares and be shot without shooting back? It seems unbelievable.»

«I wonder,» said the girl, «if they have not killed that communist whom I used to know once. He answers to the description: young, slight, with dry features...»

«It is possible,» replied the boy. That was the description he had read under the photograph in that poster. He wanted to cut short his visit and go to the comrades. «The comrades! Who knows how they would receive the news? Should I be the first to tell them? They are expecting quite different news from me...»

Emira looked at him searchingly.

«Do you really think it possible?» she asked. «I

don't believe it... But if it is true, it would be a hard blow to me, I assure you sincerely.»

«I don't understand you,» said the boy at last with some irritation that did not escape the girl's attention.

«You don't understand me... I know... Nobody seems to understand me, nobody.»

Without raising her head, the girl gave him her hand and the boy walked out without another word.

2

Deko hurried towards the base where he was sure to find some of the comrades. Drita's mother, who ran to open the door, could not recognize him at first, so much his face had changed. Even when she recognized him she did not take him straight to the comrades but took him first to the kitchen where she was frying eggs and cheese for supper.

«I have urgent business with them, mother, why did you bring me here,» he complained.

«Yes, my boy, but you will have to wait until they finish, for that is what they told me.»

«Is that what they told you? And what if I have come to tell them that the Germans are coming to surround the house, would you let me in or would you ask me to wait till they finish?»

Mother Zela dropped the frying pan on the fire.

«What is that you are talking about? Are you joking or...?»

«What! You want me to reveal the secrets of the Party, it seems to me, but don't expect anything of that kind from me, go tell them that Deko has come on

a business that can't wait and you will see if they won't let me in.»

The woman did not refuse him. She opened quietly the door and, without asking permission of the comrades, invited Deko to go in.

The room was quiet. Zef was sitting on the sofa writing something in his notebook, while Alert was standing by the window with his hands in his pockets.

«Come in, Deko, why didn't you come straight in? It is some minutes since you crossed the yard,» said Alert smiling and stepped over to meet the boy. «You seem to enjoy mother Zela's company.»

Zef and Drita interrupted their work and stood up.

Deko lowered his eyes and hesitated. From Alert's manner he saw that they had not yet heard what had happened. «Why are you looking like that?» asked Alert again. «Haven't you heard the latest news?»

«No. What news?»

«About Arta... She was freed... Alert saw that his word made no impression on the boy and changed his tone. «Wait a moment. What is the matter with you? You don't seem well...»

«I am quite well, Comrade Alert, but you don't know what a terrible thing has happened.»

«A terrible thing? What is it? Speak!» Alert came closer to the boy and, seeing that his lips were trembling, caught him by the arms and shook him.»

«Out with it! Will you tell us what it is or...»

Zef and Rexha also came closer.

«They have killed Piciruku, comrades!» cried at last Deko as if pleading for vengeance. «Piciruku!...» He wanted to continue but his words stuck in his throat and he burst into tears. He covered his eyes with his hands and again lowered his head.

Alert looked fiercely at the comrades who were



staring in despair at Deko, waiting for further information.

«Do you expect further details?» Alert said angrily, almost scornfully, as if wanting to give vent to his bitterness and at the same time to his disappointment. «I can give them to you. They have killed him at Lapraka, you can take my word for it. And he had been asking for it... All the time!»

Deko raised suddenly his head and stared at Alert astonished. How could he know where Piciruku was killed? And what was the meaning of his anger at Piciruku? And Zef was doing nothing to stop his mouth. How could Alert talk like that about a dear comrade like Piciruku who had given his life for his ideal?

Deko did not stop to find an answer to these questions but, shaken as he was by his sorrow, turned to Zef and whispered:

«Yes, at Lapraka. That is where he was killed.»

A deep line furrowed the forehead of Zef Moisiu. His face shrank as from a deep physical pain; he shut his eyes and tightened his lips in an effort to support the pain. He stood like that for a few seconds, then, with a broken voice that sounded heavy in the silence of the room, said slowly and with deep regret:

«That was not the death for a communist. Our Piciruku did not deserve to die like that.»

### 3

Safka, who was arrested immediately after Piciruku was killed, did not admit that she had any links with him. She said that she had known him superfi-

cially, that he had come to her house that afternoon as a person who had nowhere to go and she could not refuse him hospitality. The letter they had found on him was not addressed to her by name, it could have been intended for somebody else. «The fact, it was written in the statement signed by lieutenant Dika, «that the girl had admitted with her own words that she had understood the reasons that had obliged the bandit to knock at her door so late, but had not had the courage to send him away and tell him that she was alone with her sick old parents in the house and had no business to mix in such affairs.»

Major Jahja read the statement and smiled. It had never occurred to him to believe the words of the arrested, but this time, in his state of exhilarating satisfaction and to please Lieutenant Dika who had his «personal reasons» for giving a favourable opinion about the girl, signed the order for her immediate release, not without adding a warning for her future behaviour.

The next day Safka was released. Alert, who had been asked to meet her and speak with her, was astonished to hear her accuse Piciruku and his comrades for allowing him to come to Tirana. She had scolded him and asked him to leave immediately, as if she had foreseen the tragedy that was going to happen. And when he had insisted to stay, she had proposed to run away together with him out of the town. «But he wouldn't listen and he paid his error with his life,» sighed Safka at last. And later, when they talked about other matters, she frequently stopped in the middle of a sentence and sighed pitifully, which showed how deeply affected she was by the tragic loss of her friend.

«You say you weren't in the room with him when the gendarmes entered?» asked Alert returning to the first subject.

«No, I wasn't. I stayed about an hour awake fear-

ing the worst. Then I decided that the danger of a night control had passed and went to sleep with my mother so as to be able to get up early in case of any surprise control in the morning. I even asked my mother to wake me up before dawn, but... it was not necessary...»

He stood for a time motionless, looking fixedly at one point of the wall.

«I have a suspicion...» she said uncertainly at Alert. «I may be wrong... but a sympathizer, or party member, I don't know what he is, who lives next door to us... His name is Ismail... He often goes to Safet Bey's house. I don't know Safet Bey but I know his daughter with whom Ismail has fallen in love, and she surely is a light-minded one. Ismail was often seen with Piciruku and I think that he might have a finger in that affair... I don't like his relations with the daughter of a bey... But there is a reason why I can't be sure about it. For several days Ismail has not been seen about and they say he has gone to the mountains. And yet I can't get rid of my doubts. I have noticed that during the police controls they never search Ismail's house.

«Ismail...» muttered Alert. «He has known Shtëllunga when they were children.

The girl started when she heard the name of Shtëllunga:

«Shtëllunga? Isn't he the boy who died from the tortures?»

«Yes.»

«Did they find out who spied on him?»

«They say they did...»

Safka looked at him doubtfully but did not insist with her questions.

«That night Piciruku spoke to me about another thing,» she changed the subject. «About an action he was planning to undertake with the comrades of Peza against the prison. But the plan, the way they intend-

ed to tackle it, could not be carried out, since a corporal of the prison who had offered his house as a base for the unit that was to undertake the action had changed his mind.

Alert's interest was suddenly aroused.

«Didn't he tell you anything else?» he asked as soon as the girl had finished.

«He told me that the corporal, from whom he had just parted, had changed his mind not because he feared for himself but because the Germans had searched his house as if they suspected something and had posted guards around his house for several days.

«In short, the corporal had left the comrades in the lurch,» said Alert with a gesture of disappointment.

«I do not see it that way... On the contrary, Piciruku told me that the corporal regretted sincerely what had happened and, to prove his good faith, he had promised to carry out alone an action so that the comrades should be reassured about his loyalty.

While the girl was talking, Alert was reflecting about the corporal and the weight of the promise he had made. Piciruku was the only comrade who had contacted the corporal on that action, and the corporal knew Piciruku's hot temper. If Piciruku could be eliminated, the corporal would run no risk. And Piciruku had given him the best opportunity by meeting him that evening before going to Safka's house. It was quite clear...

«Doesn't it occur to you, Safka, that the corporal is the real murderer of Piciruku?» he asked surprised at her good opinion of the corporal.

«I don't believe it,» she replied tartly. «Piciruku has carried out much work with the aid of that corporal and trusted him completely. Then...» she lowered her voice and continued uncertainly, «there is another thing that makes me doubt... Have you had any news from the prison lately?»

«No, What news?»

«I don't know, but last night at the command of the gendarmerie, when they called me to tell me that they were going to release me, I overheard something... The two officers who came to our house in the night of the control were talking to each other. It was before I entered the room, and the door was open. They seemed alarmed and frightened. An officer in service at the prison had escaped together with an important prisoner. The affair seemed so important for the two officers that the one of them ended by saying: «At any event, this matter must remain between us...» And when the guard pushed me into the room. I heard the second officer say: «Major Jahja has ordered that the matter should by no means be reported to major Ficht.»

Alert stood thinking for a moment. Could that affair have any connection with the note he had received that morning from Zef? He fumbled in his pocket but could not find it. Anyhow, he remembered its contents: it was about a trusted and capable doctor who had to be sent as soon as possible to Bimi. Alert had seen to it, but he had no time to find out who the patient was. It could not be any one in the town but someone in the villages around Tirana.

He nodded his head and smiled to the girl.

«I won't be surprised, Safka, if what you suspect is true.» Then, as he was preparing to leave her, he continued: «But you should not mention it to anybody else... And about that fellow Ismail, don't mention him, either. Not even to the comrades of the Party. Is that clear?»

He shook hands with her and walked out.

## CHAPTER X

### 1

For many days after that ridiculous scene caused by the party tract at the house of Mr. Kasimati, Miti Katundi led the strange life of a vagabond. He showed up only once at his home to tell his mother that he preferred to stay in prison rather than in the network that his brother-in-law had prepared for him. Mrs. Agllai, who had recovered from the shock she had suffered some weeks before, had begun once more to show signs of uneasiness, but the boy had cut her short: «Either in jail or in the mountains, or I will put a bullet through my head, put an end to the whole damned business. I have no other choice!» Willy nilly, the mother accepted the second solution and took measures to secure her own safety by abandoning her house. She went to her daughter, but Mr. Banka kept her only two days then burst out: «Either you hand over the boy to me or... you will mind your own business and I will mind mine... I have no intention to answer for your childish whims». And she left cursing herself for having married her daughter to a «bad moslem» and her daughter who, for the sake of her husband, had gone so far as to raise a hand against her own brother. «They are much worse than the boy, both of them. What did they expect me to do? To betray my own son? They can go to the devil!»

She looked for Miti wherever she thought he might be but she found neither him nor any of his friends. «He has run away, my dear boy, he has run away

to his comrades in the mountains», she thought. And despite the danger for herself and the longing for the boy, Mrs. Agllai reassured herself: «They know that he is my only son, the comrades, and they will protect him.»

But Miti had not run away from Tirana. First of all, because he did not know how to get out of the town, then because though he had walked all the streets, sometimes risking to fall once more into the hands of Mr. Banka, he had not met any of the comrades he knew. At Alert's he found the door with a big lock on it, which reminded him of the prison. The worst happened on the third day when he met Bimi. Bimi looked at him with disgust and refused to speak to him, and when Miti asked for an explanation, he muttered angrily: «You are nothing but an agent provocateur! Get away!» The fellow felt completely at a loss, partly with shame, partly with fear. Miti attributed the terrible accusation to the few words which had escaped him that day at Mr. Banka's when he had gotten drunk with a glass of wine. There could be no greater humiliation for a young man like Miti. No. Then it had its dangerous side, too. But to whom could he explain the whole affair? There was Uncle Kristo's family, who had kept him those days; they were decent people, devoted to the Movement, and they thought that Miti, having been in jail, must be an important member of the Party. What if they would find out how the Party had qualified him? Now would he dare show himself before their eyes? It would be an unbearable shame!

From that day Miti began to avoid meeting the people of that family and kept more and more to himself in the cellar where he had been hiding and he was freezing to death. Whenever he came out, and it wasn't very often, he did not know what to fear most. The Germans and the Ballists could have been notified about him by his brother-in-law, the comrades of the

Party must consider him a spy. «An agent provocateur! Me! They even accepted me as a party member when I was in jail! All right then. Let the Party put me to whatever test it chooses! I am ready to pay with my life for my error, if they find it such a big one.» But where could he find the comrades to explain himself? There was a time when Miti arranged the affairs of others who wanted to meet Zef, or Alert, or some other member of the District Committee... But now? Could they realize in what a terrible state he was? Or may be that «agent provocateur» was just a supposition of that rascal Bimi? It would not surprise him. Once, when they were distributing tracts together, Bimi had got cross with Miti and called him a bourgeois. «It means that Bimi has not forgotten his old grudges, the fool! And he calls himself a worker!»

Miti got up in a very depressed mood, put on his jacket and went out. He hoped to find somebody he knew and to send word to the comrades of the District Committee. He should try some of the old bases that Zef had been using at one time, perhaps the house of Rista and Evgjenia in the «Sulejman Pasha» Street, or at uncle Jani near the hospital. He ought to have thought of them earlier.

He knew nothing of what had been going on in Tirana lately. In jail they had often talked about the situation at home and abroad, but in general terms. Even after he was released he was given no opportunity to learn very much, and after his encounter with Bimi he found himself completely shut out.

As he was about to knock at the door, he heard behind him the steps of the landlord, Uncle Kristo, and turned around to greet him. The old man only motioned him to wait and Miti felt a chill run through his back fearing that Uncle Kristo was going to mention the matter that preoccupied him most.

But the old man smiled and seemed pleased to meet him.



«Where are you going so early?» he asked.

«I want to see the comrades about a personal matter.»

«That can wait, come in for a minute.»

Miti began to worry again. «They must have told him something. It is a shame! It is terribly wicked on the part of Bimi. What am I to tell now to this man who has been so kind to me and has had a good opinion of me?

The old man led Miti to the guest room and then did some thing that left Miti even more perplexed: instead of following his guest into the room, the old man turned the key from the outside and went back to the yard.

«What can that mean?» the boy asked himself. «Was he just absent-minded or was he instructed to lock me in? No, no!» Miti could not believe that they would go so far as that. He had heard so much about the way the Party dealt with the conflicts that arose within its ranks, particularly about the way it had acted in the case of the factionalist group of Anastas Lula and Sadik Premte. It is true that in that case the Party had been obliged to eliminate them, but not before all the previous efforts had proved vain. Could Miti's involuntary error be compared to their crime! No, never!

Troubled by his reflections, Miti stood in the middle of the room, motionless. The room was in semi-darkness, partly because the sun was not yet high enough, partly because the curtains were keeping the light out, so that Miti could hardly distinguish the furniture. But after a while he recovered his courage, lifted a corner of the curtain and looked out into the yard. The landlord was pacing slowly up and down, twirling the chain of his keys round his finger. «This is queer!» thought Miti and wanted to open the window and speak to the man.

But before he could open his mouth he felt a hand touch his shoulder and made him stand like paralysed. Turning slowly his head as through a cloud of mist, he saw a man standing behind him, smiling despite the tired look of his face.

«Death to fascism! Why are you staring at me like that?» asked the man as he took Miti's hand.

Miti drew back, opened wide his astonished eyes, winked several times to make sure he was not dreaming and exclaimed with a hardly audible but happy whisper:

«Zef! Comrade Zef! I can't believe it, by my ideal! How did you come in?»

Zef pointed with his head at a small door behind a thick curtain in a corner of the room.

«I came here last night, to Uncle Kristo... And how are you? They tell me you are keeping entirely to yourself. Why so? Haven't you re-established your links yet?»

«What links, Comrade Zef? I...

«Your personal links, to begin with. You were admitted as a party member, weren't you?»

«Yes, but...»

«Of course, of course. You must renew your links as soon as possible, starting from today...» Zef gave him no chance to open his heart, particularly about that rash fellow, Bimi, who had gone so far as to call him an agent provocateur, him, Miti, his party comrade! Who had authorized him to do it? Did he think he could act over the head of the District Committee? From the hurried way Zef was speaking it was clear that he had no time to listen to Miti's grievances and must have other, much more important matters on hand. Perhaps in the next room behind that small door the comrades were waiting for him, or maybe he had other appointments and had to go out.

So Miti had to content himself with a short, «Yes, Comrade Zef», and took a step towards the door.

«Just a minute! Where do you want to go? You did not even ask how you are going to establish your links.» Zef stopped him.

Miti blushed.

«Ah, yes! I beg your pardon,» he said.

«At half past four you will go to the Carnarvon Library and there you will meet Bimi. Comrade Bimi will be your first link.»

«Bimi? It is impossible!... No, comrade Zef... He... he...» Miti began to stutter and could not continue.

«He called you agent provocateur?» Zef completed his thought. «Was that what you wanted to tell me?»

«Yes... so, you knew all about it,» said Miti surprised. «You can't imagine how much those words have hurt me, comrade Zef.»

«Yes, of course. But they have hurt Bimi too, though he was not so much to blame. He had heard only the one side of the matter...»

Miti was suddenly overcome by an intense emotion which he had never felt before. He stood gasping at Zef's face, which seemed to him the dearest face in the world.

How wrong he had been in all the bad thoughts he had that morning and for many days and nights before that. «Ah, Bimi, Bimi! Why did you have to put me in such a terrible position? Why didn't you stop to hear what I could have to say?... Well, it appears this matter is settled now, and the important thing is that the Party knows all about it.»

He raised his head, looked at Zef with gratitude and gave him his hand.

«Is everything clear now?» Zef asked smiling. Miti nodded. «And don't forget, at half past four at the Carnarvon library. Bimi will tell you everything you may want to know.»

Zef unlocked the door with a key he had in his pocket and shook hands with him.

«So long, then.»

«So long, Comrade Zef, and thank you!... Death to fascism!» said Miti.

In the yard Uncle Kristo was still walking up and down, playing with his keys. Miti gave him a look of gratitude and smiled at him happily and with some pride, as if to say: «I too have my duties, you see?»

2

The house of Nekie Talo had never before been so full of happiness as that night. When Nekie heard about Galip Bey's death she took so much courage that she seemed not to care about the horde of people he had left behind who still held the power in their hands. She was not impressed even by the Germans with all their display of force and arrogance.

That evening the Philosopher had brought a new guest, Miti. Nekie had no time to ask who Miti was because her boy gave her no chance, full as he was with the wonderful news that Arta was freed and was now safe and well among her comrades. He did not know how to explain the miracle and his mother was not convinced that it could be true.

«I can't believe it...truly. Who told you?»

«Alert, mother, Alert himself! But it shouldn't be spread around.»

«Well, that is wonderful! Then you are sure Arta is safe. Thank god, thank god!»

It was the second good news after that of the Congress of Përmet.

A little later a second guest arrived whom neither

the mother nor the son recognized at first. He was dressed as a peasant, like the courier Veli, but he was quite different from the courier.

The guest stepped across the threshold without speaking, took off his coat and his cap, and only then Nekie recognized him and screamed so loudly that it would have been heard in the street if the Philosopher had not closed the door in time:

«Ferik!» she cried and tried to stop her mouth with her hand.

He shook hands heartily with his wife, then took the boy in his arms and kissed him.

Miti, who had already guessed who the newcomer was, stood a little apart watching the scene and was so deeply moved that his eyes were filled with tears. He allowed Ferik the time to enjoy the first moments of his return to the family, then stepped respectfully forward and asked to be introduced.

The Philosopher looked at him with his eyes sparkling with happiness.

«This is a friend of ours,» he explained. «The comrades of the District Committee have sent him to us for one or two days.

Ferik smiled noticing the grown-up manner in which the boy gave the explanation, then returned seriously to Miti:

— Are you armed?

— No. Do I have to be?

— Well, you know, the comrades who leave the town and join the partisans usually bring their weapons with them. We don't have an arsenal over there...»

Miti looked down and thought: «This fellow seems to know that I am going to the mountains, and it doesn't seem as simple as I imagined it to be. I ought to have taken a gun... Why didn't Bimi tell me, the bastard? I always have troubles with him, although

I must admit that the last time he behaved rather decently.»

«Oh, it doesn't matter» continued Ferik. «We will see what we can do about it. But first Nekia must give us something to eat,» he turned to his wife who was already making the fire.

«Leave that to me,» she said. «I shall prepare something with what we have in the house.»

The Philosopher came close to Miti and whispered:

«So you are going to the mountain?»

«Yes.»

«And you told me nothing about it.»

«I couldn't. Bimi told me to keep it secret.»

«It is all right. But now it is up to me to decide.»

«How is that?»

The Philosopher came a little closer.

«I have a gun, you know...»

«Indeed? Where do you keep it?»

«In the garden behind the house... Some English hand-grenades, too, the ones they call «turtles».»

«No!»

«I swear!»

«Well, what do you propose?»

«You tell father to take me along with you, then the matter will be arranged for both of us...»

«We shall go together, you and I,» Ferik interrupted them, addressing Miti. «We shall start tonight. Have you been in a unit in town?»

Miti blushed.

«I have... But I have never taken part in an action. I have only learned to throw hand-grenades and to use a «Beretta» pistol.

«That is not bad,» smiled Ferik.

For two hours after supper Ferik held them fascinated by telling them about his partisan life. He described the case with the Ballists who had taken him to shoot him. He talked about it lightly, as if it had been something of little importance, but Nekia was

holding her breath, brushing off a tear from time to time. The Philosopher could not take his eyes off his father. He would have liked to ask for more details, but seeing that his mother and Miti were silent, he kept quiet.

«The dirty swine!» he could not help exclaiming when Ferik told them how at the trial Galip Bey had pretended to be a good and kind-hearted old man. «Did he recognize you, father?»

Nekia frowned and remarked in an undertone:

«The kid knows all about it, you can't stop him from learning anything.»

Miti had looked his hands together and was watching with deep sympathy that unusual family scene, in the background of which he could see the moving shadows of a long drama of the kind he had only read in novels.

When supper was over, Nekie cleaned up, washed the dishes and sat down to take part in the conversation. She spoke in a free, open manner, recalling the years of her childhood and youth when she had suffered so much in Galip Bey's house, adding from time to time some funny episode from the life of the peasants. Even at that time the sight of Ferik had brought a feeling of comfort and security in the heart of the seventeen year-old girl, but she had never dared speak to him, knowing that if the bey noticed it he would turn the world upside down in his anger. The bey had a proprietary attitude not only with the house servants but also with the pretty daughters of the peasants who worked on his lands. When he came out in the field riding on his bay and saw some «lily of the march», as he used to call the pretty girls of the huts, he would call her parents to him and warned them not to promise her to anybody for marriage without his permission. And woe to those who did not obey him! Their only way to avoid the consequences

of his anger was to escape to some remote corner of the country where he could not find them.

That was what Ferik and Nekia had tried to do twelve years ago when they decided to get married against the bey's will. And they had to pay dearly for it for all these long years.

But they had survived, they and their little son Filo. What was it that had kept them alive? It was the thought that passed through Ferik's mind whenever he watched the never smiling face of his wife and tried to give her courage. «Why don't your eyes laugh, you poor heart? I have never seen you laugh since we were married. We didn't die when we were out on the road and we won't die now that I have found this work to keep us from starving», he told her once when he brought her his first wages from the brick factory. But Nekia had remained sad as always. Even when she attempted a smile, it did not come from her heart but only to please her husband.

That is why now he was so surprised to see her chatting and laughing happily as she had never done before. What could be the reason? Was it because she thought that their misery was finally coming to an end? No, they were still as poor as they had always been. Take the supper they had just eaten: a dish of potatoes with only a spoonful of oil and no meat in it and a bowl of milk for the four of them. His wife and the boy seemed to enjoy it. «A dinner to honour our guests!» the boy had remarked with satisfaction as he swept his dish clean with his last piece of bread. Miti, who had been brought up in quite different circumstances, had only drunk his milk and had not even tasted the potatoes, swearing that he had eaten his supper before leaving his home.

What then could be the cause of Nekia's happiness? Could it be the news of Galip Bey's death? Could that man have inspired her with so much horror? Ferik had also feared him, but not so much as



not to be able to smile even in his dreams. These last two or three years in particular, since he had succeeded in escaping from the bey's persecution and had provided a comparatively stable home for his family, Ferik had got rid of the old obsession.

During their talk, which continued until late into the night, Ferik realized that the change in his wife was due not Galip bey's death but to something else besides. She spoke of Arta with love and admiration, praising her intelligence, her courage, her profound feeling of sympathy for those who suffered. «I am ready at any moment to throw myself from the high rock if she asks me to do it», she declared.

«Who this Arta is?» asked Ferik as though he had never heard about her.

«Who is Arta?... She is a communist, a genuine one!... She used to be the responsible of the cell to which I was a member,» said Nekija, realizing too late that she was not supposed to reveal it.

Ferik raised his eyes in surprise.

«Mother is giving away her secret,» laughed the Philosopher. Miti, on the contrary, neither laughed nor stirred but kept his eyes fixed on Nekija, at that unschooled working woman whom he had met some hours before as just another woman of her type and who now appeared completely different: wise, courageous and sure of herself.

«She gave it away indeed,» smiled Ferik, shaking his head. But he was not thinking about Nekia's slip of the tongue but about her being a party member. Now he could understand the cause of her deep change. How could she have deserved it? There, in the mountains, they required so much before they admitted you to the ranks of the Party: participation in actions, courage and determination, leadership ability, initiative and prompt decision making whenever there was no way of receiving orders from your superior, and a number of other qualities. On several occasions he had

proved to himself and the others that he possessed these qualities, and yet it was only lately that he had made up his mind to apply for party membership. What could Nekie have done to prove her merits? It was true that conditions in the mountain differed from those in town, but here also one had to give proof of wisdom, ability and courage to be a party member... Nekie, conscious of having made a mistake, did not allow her embarrassment to show itself but went on describing some of her first impressions of Arta, of how Arta had taught her to work among the women of her own condition, how to behave in the rich families for whom she worked, how to listen and watch what they were doing and then report it to the cell. In that sense Nekie had made so much progress that the comrades of her cell had been obliged to change completely their attitude towards her, regarded her with respect and listened with attention to what she said during the discussions at their meetings. Bimi, in his exuberant joy at the change he was witnessing in that former house servant, had jumped up from his seat and embraced her. Nekie had been shocked by it, but when she realized that he had no evil intentions and that he was behaving the same way with Arta, she stopped worrying about it. A few days after that she had been asked to distribute tracts together with Bimi. At first she had frightened by the risks of that task but she had not shown it. The courage of the boy, to whom distributing tracts was no more dangerous than «taking snuff», had helped to reassure her. And indeed, the way he organized the job eliminated much of the risk. Recently she had asked for more tracts than she had been given at first. The death of Galip Bey seemed to have opened for her the doors of many of the house and she no longer had to look right and left with the corner of her eyes to make sure that neither Galip Bey nor any of his men were around. She had even given up

wearing the veil which had been darkening her life for such a long time, and now her face had taken a healthy brown complexion.

Ferik noticed the beneficial effect of the sun not only on her face but also on her mind and her spirit. He could hardly get over his surprise and his boundless satisfaction... The Philosopher also astonished him with his «adventures». Ferik knew that his boy was clever and quite mature for his age, but he could never imagine that his File would win the confidence of the comrades to the extent of trusting him with such difficult and delicate tasks.

Miti was listening with curiosity about the Philosopher's encounters with members of the District Committee and could not help envying him for it. With what he had learned during his four months in jail Miti had been convinced that prison was the best school for a communist, but now he had to change that conviction. Neither Nekije nor the Philosopher had been in jail, and look what progress they had made! Four months before, the Philosopher had been just another small boy selling peanuts in the coffee houses. Miti had known him through Arla and had occasionally given him some message for some comrade, but only when Miti could not do it himself. So much and nothing more... But... Now the Philosopher was seriously troubling the water to the Germans and the quislings, while Miti had lost so much through the error into which Mr. Banka had led him, and now his only hope to recover the lost ground was his future activity as a partisan. It was up to him now to catch up with the other comrades.

## CHAPTER XI

### 1

Nekie heard about Piciruku's death several days after the event. Deko gave her the news so briefly that at first she did not understand who was the man they had killed. When finally she realised that it was the cheerful young fellow who had slept in her house one night last March and for whose head the fascists were offering a reward of many thousands of francs, she wept bitterly. She asked where his people lived, whether he had a mother, a sister, or some other relative, but nobody seemed to know anything. Deko always came to her in a hurry, giving her what instructions he had for her and was off in no time. In vain she tried to keep him a little longer, particularly when she had something to offer him; his invariable reply was: «Not now, not now, we will have plenty of time to talk and feast later when the country will be free...» And he was off without even saying, «Death to fascism!»

It was the same that morning when he came as unexpectedly as always. As they belonged to the same communist cells, Nekija wanted to ask him about some matters that interested her, but he cut her short:

«I have no time to talk about these things now, Netka, you will have to sort them out yourself. Now I have only one problem to discuss with you and it is very important.»

She stood in front of him with her arms akimbo and listened.

«I have arranged for you to work as servant for

a few days to the house of a rich man at Lapraka. You will accept any service they may ask and don't bargain too much over the wages they will offer. But you must watch carefully who comes to the house and try to hear as much as you can of what they talk about. The owner is a man who usually wears a white summer suit, a straw hat and carries a cane. His name is Safet Backa.

«Safet Backa!» she exclaimed astonished.

«Safet Backa!» in person! Why are you frightened?

It is exactly the same man whom you mentioned in your discussion at the meeting of our cell when you were admitted to the Party. But we are sure he won't recognize you now. Here is a new identity card for you, with your photo and all. Your name will be Nekie Zelo and you come from the villages of Dangllia. Your husband is a certain Faik with whom you have quarrelled and whom you have left in the first year of your marriage. You have no children. Try to remember all I am saying. You have come recently to Tirana like many other families out of fear of the partisans. But you should not pretend to be a Ballist, either. Pretend to know nothing about politics. If they ask where you live, tell them that an aunt of yours has given you hospitality for the time being in a house near the hospital. That is all for the present; later we may give you some new instructions. Is that clear?»

Nekie nodded and asked no questions though she would have liked to know more about her new task. Deko disappeared behind the house but a minute later he came back, craned his neck through the window with the broken pane and, as he saw Nekie standing in the middle of the room thinking, he called her to come near him.

«You seem undecided. What is the matter? Tell it openly like a communist. If you think you can't do it, we can send someone else in your place, but we

thought you were suited for the job better than anybody else. Do you find it too risky?»

«How can you say such a thing, Comrade Deko?» Nekie felt offended. «I swear by the head of my son that I am not afraid at all. I was only wondering whether I could do the job properly. Besides, you did not tell me when to go to that house, what to tell them when I go there, must I tell them who is sending me or just ask whether they need a servant?

Deko smiled with satisfaction.

«Only the other day you were telling me that you were an ignorant woman who has so many things to learn. Now I see that you are exceptional, unique. You want to work out all the details... That is why I came back. I saw that my instructions were too sketchy, that we had to plan the whole thing clearly and leave nothing to chance... Listen now, you will go there today. You will knock at the door and, whoever opens it, you will tell him that you are the washer-woman about whom the Velo family have spoken to the young lady, to Mr. Backa's daughter, I mean, and I think that will be sufficient. So long now and good luck!»

2

The first to come to Mr. Backa's house after Nekie had begun her new job was a shortish man wearing a grey suit, a straw hat and a conspicuous watch chain across the front of his waistcoat. His haggard face with the short greying mustache and the frowning eyebrows gave him the appearance of a man in deep trouble or in need of help, although his clothes gave him an air

of respectability. The man-servant who let him in accompanied him as far as the inner door, where Mr. Backa himself came out to meet him. Nekie, who at that time was on her hands and knees scrubbing the slates of the yard, drew as close to them as she dared.

The visitor took off his hat and bowed very low, while Mr. Backa, holding his cane in his hand, raised his head a little to look from under his glasses, then, keeping his body straight and his hat on, gave the visitor his limp hand.

«Only you and god can help me now, Safet Bey!» said the visitor with a plaintive voice. Nekie noticed with satisfaction that Mr. Backa looked changed and much older than she had expected and was no longer the Safet Bey she had known so many years before. He was wearing glasses, too, and now she was sure that he would not recognize her.

«What do you want?» he asked haughtily.

The visitor, unnerved by the cold reception, took a step back and slowly straightened his body.

To Nekie he looked like a man who has received a heavy blow or like one of those «men of god» pleading for charity. «They have dismissed me, Safet Bey, they have sacked me!» he said with trembling lips and a gesture of despair. ,

Mr. Backa did not seem moved by it. He took a silver box out of his pocket, took a pinch of snuff, drew it in and sneezed.

«Is that all? Who did it?» he asked.

«That is the worst part of it,» sighed the visitor. «His excellency sacked me, the minister himself.»

«The minister! No!» only now Mr. Backa's interest seemed aroused. «What reason did he give?»

The visitor let his hands drop helplessly along his sides, bent his head to one side and numbed:

«He said I was a communist.»

«A communist? Ha, ha, ha!... Uran Rama a communist? That is the funniest thing I ever heard! Tell me, how did it happen?»

Mr. Rama glanced at Nekie, then came closer to Mr. Backa.

«Well, it happened like that... The minister was angry because many of the school-teachers are siding with the communists and he thinks I am to blame for it. But the main cause was one of my subordinates, a certain Aleko, whom I have always considered a serious young man, but he turned out to be a dangerous fellow... Then there was that affair with Professor Filipi who died under the tortures without revealing anything; that also angered the minister. Filipi, a retired teacher, how could I ever imagine him capable of such a thing? He used to be an old friend of mine and he looked all right, though rather eccentric...»

While the inspector Rama was talking, Mr. Backa was keeping his eyes half closed, listening attentively. Only when he saw that Rama had nothing more to say, he caught him by the arm and led him towards the house.

Nekie could overhear only part of their conversation.

«That was lucky for us, Mr. Rama, don't you see?» The visitor opened his eyes and stared at Mr. Backa as if to make sure that he was in his right mind. But Mr. Backa insisted. «It is extremely lucky, I assure you. We need people like you...»

«I don't understand you, excuse me but...» said Rama hesitatingly.

«Isn't it clear enough? Now you are a friend of the communists.»

«A friend of the communists? I?»

«You, of course. You are a friend of the communists and you will remain their friend as long as



the interests of nationalism will require it. Do you get me?»

The two friends continued their talk inside the corridor, so that Nekie could not hear them any longer, but from the gestures she could see through the window pane she understood that Mr. Rama was accepting his new role.

When he left the house, Mr. Rama, unable to find enough words to thank his host held his hand until they reached the street door.

\* \* \*

The work in the house of Mr. Backa could not be finished in one or two days. His daughter was very much satisfied with Nekie's neat and careful work and insisted that they should keep her as a permanent servant. But Nekie could not be persuaded to stay; she said that she would stay only a few days, «until the war with the partisans was over», then she would go back to her village, where she had left her mother, the house and the two acres of corn-field.

«Are you so much set against the partisans?» asked her one day Miss Eda.

«That is what they say miss, they say the partisans kill people, burn down houses...How should I know?..»

«Do you know that my lover is a partisan?» said the girl proudly.

Nekie made a sour face then laughed.

«I assure you! Only it is so long since I last heard from him, who knows what troubles he has, poor thing! The girl saw that Nekie shrugged her

shoulders and pursed her lips perplexed and continued. «Why should you wonder? The partisans are winning their war, you can be sure of that.»

«God forbid it, miss! How can you say such things? What will become of us, the poor people, if that should happen?»

«The poor people? You silly thing! It is for you they are fighting. You'd better say what will become of the rich. It won't be a life of comfort for them. The partisans will make their women work just as you are working now.»

«That can never be,» said Nekie with conviction. «How could you work with your delicate white hands?» The girl burst laughing.

«But we are not a rich family, you fool. What are you saying? Father says that the only two farms we own have remained in Greek territory. If I were rich I wouldn't be engaged to Ismail. That is why I let him go with the partisans. But he is such a fine boy. You should see what fine curly hair he has...»

She joined together the fingers of her right hand and kissed them.

«You must be well suited to each other, miss. God has made you as pretty as a fairy. May you be happy together!»

That was enough to make the girl Nekie's «friend for life». She took care that Nekie did not overwork herself, -- two or three hours a day were quite sufficient, and told her father that they could never find a better servant. Once he even stopped to exchange a few words with the woman, to ask her where she came from, how she felt, etc., but limited his talk to the sport advice that she should work well, since «the better a horse works the more it is given to eat».

Nekie noticed that the girl, though light-headed, spoke frequently with her father about politics, and in several occasions he had told her some secret things

of some importance. One of the subjects of conversation was Ismail. One day the girl had quarrelled with her father and came to complain to Nekie. Instead of the usual praises for the man who was soon going to become her husband, she told Nekie that for many days her father had been expecting from Ismail a letter with some important information and that if the letter did not arrive within two or three days, he threatened to expose Ismail in such a way that the communists themselves would tear him to pieces.

«That is terrible, miss! Why should he do it?» asked Nekie.

«I don't really know, but father isn't to blame. It is all the fault of that German Major Ficht. He won't leave father in peace about Ismail.»

«I have never heard about that Fit, I am sure, — muttered Nekie shrugging her shoulders. «What can that Fit have to do with the fellow?»

«Not Fit, you fool,» laughed the girl. «Ficht, he is a German.»

Nekie looked at the girl, bewildered and confused.

«I shouldn't be talking to you about these things,» said the girl. «you don't understand anything. «Ficht, my dear, Ficht. He is so powerful now that he could blow all of us up whenever it occurs to him to do it. Didn't you know it? It is lucky he considers father a friend, else it would have been bad for us.»

«Why?»

«Why, why! Because father wants the communists to think well of him, while major Ficht, on the contrary...»

«Your father seems a clever man,» said Nekie with admiration.

«Clever, yes. But they don't let him have his way. He has such an ugly face, that major, you would be scared to see him in your dreams. But his orderly is a fine boy, blond, with blue eyes, so beautiful that

when he looks at me he makes my heart flutter. When the major goes upstairs, he comes to me smiling, whispers «Guten Tag, Fräulein» and laughs. He looks so nice when he laughs...»

Two days later the girl gave Nekie a very interesting news: in Mr. Backa's house had come and gone many government officials and some high ranking German officers. Many cars had stopped in front of the house, many of the men stayed for hours with Mr. Backa and when they left they shook hands long with him, expressing their wish «to see him soon at their head». As the girl saw it, they wanted to put him at the head of the government, but he could not accept unless the Germans gave him some guarantees.

In fact, it was not a question of guarantees but something quite different that made Safet Bey hesitate; he wanted the approval of the partisans. He had sent them word that he was ready to take in his hands the reins of the government in these difficult times in order to exercise his authority over the Germans to make them relax their system of terror and massacres, but that would depend on the future behaviour of the partisans.

As for his sincere aims regarding the nation, Mr. Backa had made a long list of his patriotic merits, «which should be acknowledged by the leaders of the National Liberation Movement». Then, regarding his anti-nazi feelings, he was obliged to conceal them deep in his heart for understandable reasons, but they were well known to some «ardent communists» like the son of his friend, Ismail, who was doing his patriotic duty as a partisan in the Peza army, or by some «serious men» like the inspector Uran Rama who had recently abandoned his post and crossed over to the free zone of Peza.

Miss Idda was glad, above all, that her father had dropped his objections to Ismail and had changed

his attitude to him. Of course, in order to achieve his aims, he had to maintain his friendly relations with Major Ficht. Naturally, it wasn't an empty boast on the girl's part when she claimed that her father was «able to take in all of them». It would be fine if the partisans gave their approval for her father to become a prime minister. Then Miss Backa could afford to have a special maid for her toilet, which was taking so much of her time. The big «Buick» car, that sparkled inside and out, would be waiting for her at the front door, and an officer would be standing at attention to open the door for her. All the men would raise their hats to greet her and the fine ladies would smile at her on all sides. And when she would go shopping, all the Jumas, Begejas, Gjinalis and Pogus would get respectfully to their feet, bring down all their wares and offer them to her to choose whatever she liked. Then they would pack everything nicely and carry the packages to the car with their own hands or would send her purchases later to her home. She would not bother even to pay for them. It would be considered an honour to offer to the daughter, of the prime minister their trifles as wedding presents in view of her future marriage.

«Isn't it wonderful? What do you say, Nekie?» she asked excitedly.

«It must be as you say, miss, you surely know all about it,» replied Nekija with an effort to keep a straight face.

«Yes, yes... But will the partisans agree to my father's becoming a prime minister?»

«They will agree, I am sure, why shouldn't they? Do they know more than Safet Bey?...»

The answer arrived at last, but it did not please Mr. Backa. Ismail was writing in a language that did not seem to be his own, in a language more appropriate for an ignorant fellow rather than for a man with secondary school education. But it was not the language that worried Mr. Backa, on the contrary, he found that manner of writing a very positive factor. In all probability, someone had dictated to Ismail the words and thoughts that he was unable to put in writing. It meant that the answer was more or less official. But there was something else which preoccupied him: why did Ismail write as if none of his words came directly from him? Couldn't the fellow write him a letter without the knowledge of the partisan command?

On the other hand, the answer was by no means clear. It said that Mr. Backa ought to be able to decide for himself whether he should accept to become the prime minister of a quisling government. The word «quisling» spoiled the whole thing, because Mr. Backa did not want to be qualified as a quisling, though he knew perfectly well that there was no other way of qualifying that particular post. The letter went on:

«A popular proverb says that you can't carry two melons under one arm. You are wise enough to know that you can consult a hundred people but must decide for yourself... As for the future behaviour of the partisans, abandon all hopes that they may relent their efforts. On the contrary, from now on they will intensify them to the utmost. And you will notice it pretty soon.»

«The scoundrell!» cried Mr. Backa angrily and threw away the letter. But again he remembered that it wasn't Ismail's fault, since it was not he but his superiors who had ordered him to write such rude things to a distinguished personality like him, so he

picked up the letter, read it once more carefully, and only then noticed a short note written in small letters in a corner: «It would be better to talk these matters over verbally. If you find it suitable, write to us to arrange a meeting at a safe place, possibly outside Tirana.» «That is something,» said Mr. Backa to himself, «but it might be dangerous».

He stopped to think it over, then ordered the servant to bring in the peasant who had brought the letter and was waiting in the yard.

The man took off his opingas at the door and entered. He was wearing an old peasant's cloak and a dirty white cap. His unshaven face and stooping posture made it difficult to tell his age, but he could not be much older than forty.

«Did you meet Comrade Ismail personally?» asked Mr. Backa.

The peasant looked around the room, noticed the beautiful ceilings, the paintings hanging on the walls, the high windows with the painted shades from which a light breeze was stirring the white silk curtains.

«No, I haven't met him,» he replied, unbuttoning the collar of his shirt as if to take advantage of the coolness coming from the windows. «What Ismail are you talking about? I know nobody of that name.»

Mr. Backa was surprised not so much by the answer as by the pure southern speech of the man.

«You are not from Tirana?» he asked.

«No, from Mallakastra, but...»

«I see, I see, you are illegal,» Mr. Backa interrupted him smiling. «And that letter... Who gave it to you?»

«They gave me the letter at headquarters. A young fellow gave it to me, tall, with thin eyebrows. He has not been long with us, but they say he is a very capable young man.»

«Yes, that must be Ismail. Bravo!» said Mr. Backa

with proud satisfaction. «Didn't he give you any personal message for me?»

«No, he only told me that I could talk to you simply and shook hands with me when we parted.»

«I see... What position do you occupy?»

«Me? No position at all. Just a partisan. They usually put me on sentry duty at headquarters. Now and then they give me a letter to carry somewhere, like today. But these are risky jobs, you know. Where as you Mr. Backa, it seems your Honour has a top position.»

Mr. Backa laughed within himself. «This is a queer fellow. If only the rest of them were like him!...» He glanced at him, saw that the man was fumbling in his pocket for his tobacco pouch, took from the table a mother-of-pearl cigarette box and offered it to him.

«Here, take one of these... And as for my top position, I wouldn't wish it even to my enemies. I am obliged to stay all the time with the Germans and pay them compliments, while my heart aches for the people.»

The peasant picked up a cigarette, looked it over trying to read what was printed on it and, seeing that it was foreign, said disdainfully:

«It is foreign, the devil! It burns your throat.»

«Try it first,» said Mr. Backa, lighting his cigarette lighter. «These are American cigarettes, special, aromatic.»

«No, no, thank you. No foreign stuff for me, not even if it comes from paradise.»

«Suit yourself, man,» said Mr. Backa as he blew out the lighter and looked more attentively at the peasant.

«Yes, yes... You must have brought trouble on yourself with that position of yours. It is like a woman with two husbands, isn't it? With the Germans and with the people at the same time.»



«A clever fool» thought Mr. Backa and his face darkened.

«Did you think it out yourself, or have the others taught you what to say?»

The peasant shrugged his shoulders.

«Nobody has taught me what to say. I have it from my father, he often used to repeat it, god forgive his sins.»

«I don't think your leaders are of that opinion,» Mr. Backa tried to play down his last question.

«That I don't know. It is their own business,» said the peasant reflecting. «At any rate, they are brought up on maize bread, just like me, like all the Albanians, why should they think differently?»

«Then we who have been brought up on wheat bread are not Albanians, according to you?» said Mr. Backa resentfully.

«No, no! I didn't mean it that way,» laughed the peasant exhibiting a regular row of white teeth like those of a twenty-five year old boy.

Mr. Backa began to doubt: «Could that be a real representative of the communists dressed like a peasant?»

«What did you mean, then?» he asked more softly.

«I meant it about the Albanians, bey. What else could I mean. You can take it as you like, I am only a peasant. But I was thinking about the Albanians. Maize bread has always been our food. But of course, you can find here and there people who were raised differently.

Mr. Backa did not push the question further. He only added that he was only joking, that he, too had tasted maize bread when as a small boy he visited his father's farm workers and had even enjoyed it... Then, since he had no time to write a letter he asked the peasant to tell the comrades at Peza that he was ready to meet them, but not outside Tirana, because

it could expose him too much in the eyes of the Germans and could spoil the whole thing. As for the rest, Mr. Backa was convinced that they could come to terms, since it was in the interest of the nation, and although it was true that the Germans were losing the war, «a big building is dangerous when it is falling,» concluded the bey.

4

As he crossed the threshold, the courier Veli took a breath of relief, threw the bag he had left by the door over his shoulder and took the street that led from Lapraka to the town.

Though it was almost noon, he did not see the movement that was usual at that time of the day. The armed civilians and gendarmes that used to swarm through the streets swaggering with their guns and their forelocks, were nowhere to be seen. Even of the German Feldgendarmerie guards with their heavy helmets and the metal plaques hanging on their chest he saw only a pair at the square of the ministries. But there were quite a number of citizens and strange enough they were walking quite freely about the streets.

The courier had passed the night at Nekie's house and had heard many strange things that had happened in Tirana during a month and a half of his absence and found it hard to believe that the people had taken as much courage as Nekie said. Before entering the «Count Ciano» Street, he saw in the yard of the former police office a big truck with the motor working and a number of armed civilians and gendarmes climbing on it pushing each other: they no longer had

the arrogant manner of the earlier days but looked pale and tried to talk as little as possible. Two steps before the truck was standing a German officer looking on the ground and apparently unconcerned about what was going on. When all the men were on the truck the officer took the seat beside the driver and shut the door of the cabin with a snap. Then the truck started with a roar, took the street to the left towards the Elbasan road and was off. On his way the courier heard more noise of motors coming from various directions.

Drita, who was waiting for him by the door of the house nr. 5 of the «Tinker's» Street, saw him coming and making signs like a man who sees things but cannot understand their meaning.

«They are feeling the danger, the dogs,» she whispered when they were in the yard. «They must have heard the news.»

«What news?» the courier stopped and looked at her hopefully.

«Didn't you know that the First Division has crossed the Shkumbini River and is on its way to Tirana?»

«No, I know nothing about it? Who told you that?»

«You brought the news yourself with the letter you gave me for Comrade Zef last night. It was from Comrade Toja. Zef read it to us and we were unable to sleep the whole night. Do you believe now?»

The courier did not answer but remained staring at the girl's happy face in which he seemed to see the joy of all Tirana, of all Albania...

«I believe it. Of course, I do believe it,» he whispered as to himself.

«And you didn't know it?»

«No, I didn't know it, Drita. I am a courier. I have often carried letters and packages without having the slightest idea of what was in them. Such is the job of a courier.

«To carry wine and drink water?» laughed the girl.

«Well you can put it that way if you like, but there is a difference: the wine I carry belongs to the people, and you and I, as well as many others like us are of the people. If the people are healthy and strong so are we.

Zef Moisiu heard the courier's voice and came out:

«So we meet again.» he said and embraced the courier, «Eh, Veli, Veli! I am so glad you are safe and well,» he said and led him in.

The room was cool and clean. Mother Lela had just washed the floor. Drita went to the well, drew out the jug of water she had left there to keep cool and brought it to them. The courier drank thirstily two glasses, took off the jacket and the cap and felt comfortable.

«Drita gave me the grand news about the First Division. It is the end of the German dog. I wish I had known it when I was with Backa Efendi this morning.

«Why?» asked Zef, smiling.

«I would have played such a trick on him that he would have had no sleep for at least three nights... This morning I went to his house to give him a letter from the comrades. I believe comrade Toja has mentioned it in his letter.

«Yes.»

«He is a dumb fellow, that great bey, comrade Zef. That is funny. We used to think they were clever people, but now I see that they are quite stupid. He had it fixed in his head that the Party had no reason to object to his becoming the head of the government. He took me for an uncouth yokel, and only when I told him that his position was like that of a woman with two husbands he began to suspect that he had been wrong. We had quite a conversation together, he hold-

ing his own and I mine, but about the meeting to be arranged outside Tirana I did not insist because I was afraid he might smell a rat. That, by the way, was how the comrades had instructed me to act. We shall see how we can arrange it these two or three days. I am convinced he will be lured by the bait, so long as he believes his future son-in-law is working for him... He gave me some «valuable» advice for the comrades, too. He wants them to be careful with the Germans, because «a big building is dangerous when it is falling»... The same old story. That is what the quislings were saying last year when Mussolini fell... All the same, it is a pity I didn't know about the First Division... I would have made his head turn around like...

«You will have another opportunity to do it, don't fear,» said Zef patting him on the back.

## CHAPTER XII

### 1

«What shall we do now?» Major Jahja was pacing from one end of his office to the other, slapping his forehead from time to time as if to stir his head into finding a solution. Of late he had been coming regularly to his officers, particularly since the death of Piciruku, and had been holding his head high to

show the communists (and some of his friends, too) that he was sure of himself and of the situation. It was whispered that the thought of Piciruku alive had kept him shut in for two whole months. The killing of Piciruku did him much credit, he thought, showing him as a capable, experienced and «dynamie functionary» of the gendarmerie. And things did not seem bad for a time. But bad news had begun to come from all parts, like drops of rain, about the movement of new partisan formations towards Tirana, and were causing him deep concern. His father-in-law had just returned from the visits he used to pay to his friends every time he had some news to tell them or tried to hear something new from them. He had found nobody home and had come to his son-in-law, who should be well informed about the latest developments. Hajdar Bey appeared worried, although he was still convinced that the partisans could not have formed their army divisions.

«Couldn't it be a Russian division, eh?»

«Russian, Greek, or the devils... it is their own business. The trouble is that they are at our gates, and nobody seems to give a damn,» shouted the major angrily.

To Hajdar Bey the whole situation seemed like a bad dream. The Germans had shut themselves in and refused to see any Albanian. The streets of Tirana were filled with new people, wearing all sorts of costumes and uniforms, coming from all parts of the country and bringing their families with them. Hajdar Bey himself had been obliged to put up his brother-in-law with his family of five until the situation became clearer. A number of people associated with the Balli, the Social-democracy or the Legality had suddenly disappeared and it was said that they had gone over to the other side, to the partisans. That was the case with Uran Rama of the Ministry of Education and with two intimate friends of the late Galip Bey.

Even Safet Bey Backa, whom the Balli had been keeping as a last reserve, — Hajdar Bey had it from Mithat bey himself, although it was not mentioned in official circles, — was reluctant to take in his hands the reins of a new quisling government, and it could not be excluded that he too had links with the partisans.

«I don't understand, my dear, what can these people be hoping for,» wondered Mr. Kasimati.

«They are expecting the «Engiliz»,» replied the major scornfully.

«The English?... What is wrong with the English?» the old man's face brightened. «Why shouldn't we have the English if, as they say, the days of the Germans are numbered?»

«It isn't as simple as that, Hajdar Bey. Do you think the English would come just now when the noose is tightening round our necks? No, no! The English will take their time, and the grass will be high over our graves before they decide to do something about it.»

«The grass...our graves!» The thought of death was too unpleasant for Mr. Kasimati to stay any longer.

When he came out on the street he saw that his body-guard Jani Kerri was not in his usual place beside the driver.

«Where has Jaup Kerri gone?» he shouted.

«Don't speak so loud, Hajdar Bey, they might hear you,» advised him the driver pointing at a group of Germans.

«I don't understand it,» said Hajdar bey lowering his voice.

«They are scattered in groups wherever there are armed Albanians and they take them along without asking questions,» explained the pale driver who had escaped by miracle.

«Didn't they say anything to you?»

«No, my gun is in the car, and they didn't look in it.»

The bey stood reflecting for a minute, than took off his revolver together with its belt and handed it to the driver.

«Here, put that in the car with yours, the devil take it,» he said.

The sun was hot, but the bey kept the windows of the car closed and looked straight ahead. Only the driver would throw some remark from time to time which the bey hardly heard:

«Oho! They are taking even the lawyer Velo with them... And Mrs. Banka, what does she want in Hotel «Dajti»? Could they have taken Mr. Eqrem, too? I wouldn't believe it... There is another truck full of Ballists of Galip Bey's group. They seem completely dejected... Those other ones must be newcomers, I have never seen them before. Do you know them, Hajdar Bey? They have their chief with them. There he is making a speech...»

Hajdar Bey raised his head a little but lowered it immediately.

«They are crazy!» he shouted. «They have brought the whole south to Tirana. What the devil could be the matter?»

«They have run away from the partisans, bey. That is what they say...»

«That is impossible,» cried Mr. Kasimati. «Impossible! Do you hear what I am saying, you idiot!»

2

«*Befehl ist Befehl!* An order is an order», «the Germans are quite right,» thought major Jahja. He



was glad that the Germans were at last taking measures in their own way. «You say you can't stand against the enemy? All right. I will show you how it can be done!» and they send you ahead pointing their machine-guns at your back. That was the only way to deal with Albanians...

As for his own gendarmes, despite the unpleasant things that happened with many of them in the South, Major Jahja was comparatively sure of them. That morning he had sent Lieutenant Dika with 250 of the most reliable ones to the aid of the police post of Tujan, which seemed to be the objective number one of the partisans. Tujan was well defended by the surrounding rocks, and lieutenant Dika could also rely on the forces of Abaz Kupa who was very influential in that part of the country. Let the partisans try to pass it if they dare...

Major Jahja was substituting the district commander of the gendarmerie and was expecting to receive at any moment news about the «rout of the partisans» at Tujan. He had promised it solemnly to the supreme command of the gendarmerie and to the minister of internal affairs himself, who had recently changed his attitude to the major.

It was one o'clock after midday when the telephone rang and the major grabbed the receiver:

«Tujan?»

«Yes.»

«Who are you, personally?»

«The corporal of the sentry.»

«Give me lieutenant Dika, quick!»

Instead of the expected «yes, sir», the major heard an audible yawn, as if the man at the other end had just awakened from sleep.

«Look at him!» the major clenched his teeth. «Are you still asleep, you fool? Do you know to whom you are speaking?»

The corporal did not answer. Over the telephone

came only his hard breathing, which showed that the major's threatening tone had the desired effect.

«Come on, who are you waiting for?» he said more softly. «Go call lieutenant Dika to the telephone. Tell him that Major Jahja of the district command wants him.» Then, as he was about to put the receiver on the table to light a cigarette, he heard the voice on the corporal whirh sounded somewhat changed:

«Major Jahja, you said?»

«Yes.»

«Why didn't you say so at first? It is more than an hour that we are looking for you, major. Listen, please... Lieutenant Dika... Hello! Can you hear me?»

«Yes, yes. Lieutenant Dika, you were saying... Where is he?»

«He has dislodged from Tujan.»

The major's face was contorted:

«Dislodged, yes, with all his rags and belongings. He ran away with all his hounds. Now it is your turn to run away from that district command of yours. Do you hear me, you criminal... And if you want to know who is speaking, it is the battalion commander of the Fifth Brigade of the First Shock Division of the National Liberation Army.»

Major Jahja did not hear clearly the name of the Partisan commander, but that was not important. He knew now what had happened with his forces at Tujan and remained still holding the telephone receiver, staring fixedly like a man who is showing the first signs of insanity.

«Am I dreaming, or is this the end?» he murmured weakly and let himself drop on the chair. «Yes, the end! The end!» he shouted and threw angrily the receiver on the floor breaking it to pieces.

The sentry, who had heard the noise, rushed in and saw the major lying on the floor, his face wet with sweat and distorted, his mouth open, his uniform dusty and his chest unnaturally slumped.

The defeat of the gendarmerie forces at Tujan fell as a bombshell among the leaders of the reaction. Most of them were convinced that the partisans would not be satisfied with so much and that an assault on the capital was imminent. The Germans could hide in their tanks and bunkers and wait for reinforcements without caring what happened to the Albanians, to the hundreds and hundreds who had linked their fate with them.

The panic had spread not only among the leaders but also among their followers. A number of meetings were called at the Regency, the government, the «illegal» headquarters of the Balli Kombëtar and the Legality, but nothing served to tranquillize them. Everyone began to think of his own safety. There were those, who did not consider themselves too compromised and who responded to the appeal of the First Division to join arms and fight the enemy before it was too late. The others, who knew that they would be asked to give account for their crimes, began to withdraw gradually towards Shkodra where the big wave had not yet reached. Then... Then they would act according to the circumstances...

The German command, to which these movements of its allies did not pass unnoticed, pretended to ignore them but did not remain inactive. General Fitstun declared to the press that the so-called National Liberation forces that had appeared in the vicinity of Tirana were «nothing more than the remains of the shattered bolshevik bands of the south and that very soon they too will be destroyed.»

«You see?» cried Mr. Kasimati to a group of old friends who had come to his house, among them was Mr. Banka. «They are nothing but empty words, the rumours that are being spread. The Germans are

Germans! What do these gentlemen mean by packing their bags?»

But they were only a minority, those who agreed with Hajdar Bey. Mr. Banka frowned and, instead of speaking, lighted a cigarette blowing a cloud of smoke in Hajdar Bey's face.

«You should listen to what Mithat Bey says...» he tried to continue, but the smoke made him cough and he had to stop until the attack passed. «What was I saying?»

«About the bags.» said Mr. Banka sarcastically.

«About Mithat Bey, not about the bags.» said Mr. Kasimati irritated by the sarcasm. «I have talked with him long, and he insists that only unity can save us in this difficult situation of the nation.»

Mr. Banka could not resist any longer:

«What unity do you want, Hajdar Bey? The unity that you and Mithat bey preach sitting comfortably in your verandas and watching through your binoculars how the others go sweating to dig trenches around Tirana in this heat? No, thank you! I would rather have 'each for himself' than that unity of yours.»

The others intervened to prevent a quarrel between the two «personalities». Someone explained that the rumours about Mr. Banka being mobilized to dig trenches together with the others was another mistake of the German command and that as soon as major Ficht heard about it, he would take the necessary measures.

«Every effect has its cause. The mistakes also have their sources and their purpose,» said Mr. Banka and gave no further explanation.

It became clear soon enough that General Fittun's declaration about the «bolshevik remnants» was only a pretence contradicted by the measures the German command was taking to counter the approaching storm. The mobilization of the Ballist and Zogist forces that had fled from the south after their ignominious defeat, and were hoping to find safety in Tirana, was another sign that the Germans did not feel secure.

The information coming to the District Committee, from the cells and the groups of sympathizers and from individual comrades spoke of the panic that had spread among the collaborationists, and some of the details were quite amusing. The patriot who used the pseudonym of «Plaka» and whom Zef knew as Idriz Melo, the invalid of the Vlorë war, wrote as usual without punctuation marks that he had been assaulted by a number of people asking him to put in a word for them to the Party. «Can you imagine such a thing?» wrote the old man. «They stop me in the street and instead of searching me for tracts, as they used to do before, they ask me to intercede in their favour with the Party, while I don't even know where the Party is.» Even Mrs. Agllai, who had found a way to communicate with Miti and was helping the movement with clothing and money, was sending some interesting information. Her son-in-law Eqrem Banka was no longer in good terms with the Germans and was asking Miti's advice on how to establish relations with the communists, who «were right in all their views». He even offered to write some fiery articles in «The Voice of the People» against the Germans. Mrs. Agllai, who realized that there could be some hidden purpose behind his proposal, had told him to leave her alone. «I have my own troubles and can't be bothered with yours...».

Another message confirmed that even some of the most ardent Ballists, like Raif Mata and his friends, were no longer showing their former zeal in seeking out suspected people and controlling their movements, and that had given much courage to the comrades. Bimi, who was sending that information, thought that the District Committee should instruct the comrades not to overdo it with their enthusiasm and to watch attentively the movements of the enemy. Zef agreed with the warning and took note of it. It was true that the reactionaries were losing ground, but that did not mean that they had given up the struggle. The Germans must have their reason for mobilizing the elements of the Balli and the Legality, including scribblers like Eqrem Banka who could not use a gun but could write. They were determined to defend at all costs Tirana from the attacks of the partisans from the outside. Certainly they should make their plans to defend the town from the inside too. Yesterday's information by the comrades of the prison that the Germans were planning to transfer the political comrades of all the prisoners to a concentration camp abroad stemmed from this situation. Although this was not absolutely sure, it could not be excluded that the Germans could take a measure of that kind to secure their rear. It was certain that sooner or later they would resort to other similar measures. «But for the time being we are concerned with another important matter...» thought Zef.

Comrade Skampa was reporting from the secret office of the Ministry of Internal Affairs that the German command, despite its contempt for the quisling authorities, was calling them every day, giving them new instructions. «This morning,» wrote Skampa, «the minister had a long meeting with the commandant of the gendarmerie and with some chieftains from Dibra. They discussed a plan proposed by the Germans for the encirclement and destruction of the forces of the

First Division. The Germans are counting also on the aid from the Albanian nationalist forces of Macedonia which were ready to attack, if necessary, from Dibra.

«They are making their accounts without the inn-keeper,» laughed Zef. «At any rate, the information is useful.» He put aside the letter after having underlined the more important passages. His thoughts went to its author. Comrade Skampa had written the letter with an indelible pencil on four notebook pages, very neatly and in his beautiful handwriting, so correctly in grammar and style that one would think the ministry had placed at his disposal everything and all the time he might need to do a perfect job. The report contained not only the date but the hour when it was completed: «July 10, 11 o'clock,» and now it was only two o'clock after midday. It was clear that Skampa had written his report during his working hours, together with the official reports of the ministry, under the nose of the enemies who would kill him there and then if they found him out. And he didn't seem to care... Zef did not remember clearly the face of that comrade; he had met him only once at a meeting of activists, when the man had been presented to him as comrade «Skampa», and that had been sufficient for Zef to press his hand and embrace him and to express his gratitude for the reports he was receiving from him almost every day. Now the memory of Skampa's face was getting confused with that of Ropani, who had been engaged in a similar dangerous activity in a quisling printing office under the direct supervision of the german SS police.

The irrepressible courage of a man conscious that he is fighting for a high ideal is truly marvellous! A clear contrast with the ugly instincts of people like Galip Bey and Eqrem Banka!

«I know that when a glass gets cracked, it can't be mended. And I don't mean the kind of mending you have in mind, Deko. Do you understand what I mean? I have no intention of kneeling before my adversaries. You can put that out of your mind.»

«I didn't mean it that way, miss. You should not misinterpret my words. I only told you that the Command of the Division has addressed an appeal to those who have been misled to change their attitude before it is too late.»

«Misled! Misled!...» Emira got nervously to her feet. «Who could have imagined after all, that such a big thing could come out of nothing? Neither the Marxism of the communists admits such a thing, Lavoisier himself, the great French scientist, whose name you have surely heard, says that «nothing in nature is lost. Nothing is created but only transformed.»

«Perhaps it is the latter miss,» said Deko smiling. Emira raised her head surprised.

«Transformed you mean?»

«Yes.»

«How do you know what transformation is?»

«I have learned it here and there in some booklets on Marxism.»

«I don't understand it. How does Marxism explain transformation?»

Deko explained in simple terms the change of quantity into quality by the example of the kettle with water which can not keep its lid when the water starts boiling. The water is the «amorphous crowd», frequently mentioned in the quisling papers, while the steam is the revolution which incites the crowd to rise, and the lid are the occupiers and traitors whom the steam pushes aside.

Emira was stung by that comparison and shook



her head dissatisfied. Now she was convinced that Deko, a poor orphan who had always been oppressed and humiliated, must certainly have established direct links with Qemal Orhanaj or with his comrades. «Amorphous crowd, indeed!» It sounded incongruous in the mouth of an ignorant boy like Deko. Had it not been her favourite expression when she used to discuss with Qemal the problems of the people? Qemal, on the contrary, could not stand that term and instead of it used the «broad masses of the people». A spark of anger flashed in Emira's eyes but she tried to control her feelings.

— You are a covered ember, Deko! I haven't known you well enough,» she said with a bitter smile. «Who has taught you all these things?»

«The Party,» replied the boy without hesitation. «Who else would teach me? Only the Party thinks of us, the poor people.»

«The Party! May the devil take it!» said the girl to herself. It had never occurred to her that Deko, the little boy of her servant, would one day talk to her about the Party as his support. Wasn't it Deko who until yesterday trembled before her with fear and respect? And the worst of all was the conviction which that Party had succeeded in rooting deep into the simple soul of people like Deko... That was a great achievement! You can hate it as much as you like, but you can't deny it, whereas the Balli had accomplished nothing in that sense. Indeed, it had organized conferences to explain its political attitude in given situations or to create a unified view among its members on certain problems. But what had been the result? While one strikes at the nail, another one hits the horse-shoe, and everyone sticks to his own until nobody listens to what the others are saying. Mithat Bey may well be the wisest of the wise, he may well be the best of the patriots, but that is not all that is needed. What is needed is an iron fist, and that, how-

ever painful it is to admit it, is what he is lacking.

These thoughts crossed Emira's mind while she was regarding with wonder Deko's placid face.

«So, you too have joined the Communist Party? Why haven't you ever mentioned it to me?»

«I in the Party?» Deko had not been prepared for that question, so he began to beat about the bush. «First of all, these are things that are supposed to be kept secret. Then what makes you think that I am in the Party?»

«Didn't you say yourself that the Party has taught you all these things?»

«That doesn't prove that I am in the Party, miss. The Party does not think only of its members but also of those who sympathize with it and of all the people. I have read some of its writings and there I have found some thoughts on Marxism. As for sympathizing, yes. All the poor sympathize with the party.»

Emira seemed convinced.

«All right then, Deko. It may be as you say. After all, it is none of my business. But you will have to tell me whether it was your idea to ask me to «change my road» or some one of the National Liberation Movement sent you to me?»

«It was my idea, said Deko without hesitation. «Any sympathizer would do the same with the people he knows.»

Emira was disappointed. She was expecting a different answer. Her face took a new expression. She pushed back the hair that had fallen over her eyes and looked at the boy irritated. Should she give that beggar the lesson he deserved? Of course. But what would she gain from it? Nothing. Then another thought made her desist: she could not be absolutely sure that he was not acting on someone else's behalf.

«All right then ... we will think it over,» she muttered with her eyes down. «I will talk it over with

Ajet and will give you our answer. Is it all right like that?»

«All right!» replied Deko, smiling.

6

Ajet came home late that afternoon with his cap pulled over his eyes and his clothes all creased and dusty. Emira was about to go out, but when she saw her brother entering her room in that state she almost cried out. He took off his cap and smiled, and that reassured her.

«You know the story about the boy who caught a thief in the cellar of his house? «Bring him up,» said his father. «He won't come», replied the boy. «Then let him go», said the father. «I want to, but now it is he who doesn't let me go,» said the boy. That is more or less how we stand with the Germans.

Mrs. Naime entered panting.

«So you came back?» she asked with a sigh of relief.

He looked at her with pity. Her haggard pale face showed how much she had suffered waiting for him that day.

«You have been waiting for me, surely, but I could not send you word that I would be late,» he tried to explain.

«They told us,» said the old woman recovering her breath. — «Hajdar bey sent his driver to tell us that while he was alive, he would let no harm come to Ajet Velo. Else, what is the use of having friends?..»

«Bravo, Hajdar Bey! He is a man, a true one!

Isn't that so, Emira? Only his doby-guard is a big scoundrel.»

The girl made a gesture of disdain:

«Leave alone Hajdar Bey's good qualities and go take a bath; we will have all the time to talk later.»

That evening Ajeta ate his supper in a hurry and went to bed early. He was so exhausted that he didn't even pick up the Code of Common Law, from which he always used to read a page or two before he went to sleep. He put out the lamp and closed his eyes. But his thoughts prevented him from falling asleep. Had his sister studied all the sides of the question before coming to that conclusion? Or had she been so angered by the latest events that she gave no thought to the consequences? If she had spoken directly with Qemal it would be different, since it was clear that Qemal was occupying a responsible position in the National Liberation Movement. But a fellow like Deko, who had no *voce in capitolo*<sup>1</sup>, what guarantee could one expect from him? Mr. Velo felt extremely humiliated that they had taken him along with all the others to dig trenches under the command of that blockhead of Hajdar Bey's bodyguard, Jaup Kerri. That alone was sufficient that he, in sign of protest, should go over to join the National Liberation Movement. But who could guarantee him that such a step would not lead to worse consequences? Then, to go out of Tirana was as adventurous as the travels of Ulysses. And to leave the house without a man in it was also a great risk. The Germans were terrible when they got mad at you... No, no. It wasn't a thing to be taken lightly...

He switched on the light and looked at his watch. It was midnight. In five hours he had to get up and go back to his work. Else they would consider him a deserter and then he would have to deal with those of the Kommandature. A bullet through the head would

---

<sup>1</sup> Voce in capitolo (ital.) — no say in the question.

put an end to everything. «I will have to tell mother to wake me in time,» he thought and got out of his bed.

Emira heard the shuffle of his slippers in the corridor, put her book under the pillow and ran to the door in her black hair in disorder, she looked more beautiful than usual. «No, no. It can't be done», said again Ajet to himself. «How can I go and leave that girl without protection against the brutes who go around controlling the houses?»

Emira spoke to him anxiously:

«Is anything wrong?»

«No, nothing.»

«Can't you sleep?»

«No. And you?»

«I was reading «Uncle Tom's Cabin».»

Ajet shook his head in mock disapproval.

«You are a queer one...»

«Queer?» she laughed. «Why do you say that?»

He looked at her admiring her beauty, but at the same time with concern. She felt uneasy and tried to cover her almost bare breasts by crossing her arms.

«Yes. Who would think of reading such novels in the times we are living? His light manner made it seem that he would continue the light talk, but his thoughts were elsewhere.

«Listen, Emira,» he suddenly changed his tone as if wanting to draw her attention to something serious. «I have been thinking it over and I find that our decision of two hours ago was wrong. I can't join the National Liberation Movement.»

The girl dropped her hands and stared at him fixedly:

«Why? What happened! We discussed all the details. We have no other choice. It is the only possible solution. Is it necessary to go into it for a second time?»

«I won't go, and that is that!» Ajet said curtly.  
«Please, tell mother to wake me up at four o'clock.»

Taking his eyes off from his sister, who was looking at him with scorn and disappointment, he returned to his room.

## CHAPTER XIII

### 1

The tracts announcing the arrival of the First division of the National Liberation Army in central Albania and its first victories had reached every house of the town. These who distributed them and those who read them felt no longer the fear of the first hours when reading or distributing tracts was punished by death. Members of the Party and the sympathizers continued to send in interesting news. At the «Kursaal», «Berlin», «Orologio» and other cafés many of the people belonging to the Balli and the Legality were reading them and discussing them secretly from their leaders and the Germans. They were particularly interested in the parts which mentioned by name the guilty leaders of these traitorous organizations. From this the Ballists and Zogists drew their personal conclusions. «My name is not mentioned. That means that I won't be asked to give account for my acts and can join without fear the National Liberation Movement, while the others must think it twice about it before they take such a step.» Ajet Velo had been frightened by the word

«social democrat» which was heavily underlined. «You see? You would have mourned for me if I had listened to you», he told his sister. And he thanked god that he had not put into effect their first decision. Emira had felt frustrated since that night and refused to discuss the matter. She exchanged a word or two only with her mother who continued to receive her own friends, but it was only about the household economy and when her mother asked her about it. But she refused to talk about the situation even with her mother. «Leave these things alone, they are no concern of yours», she would say.

The last time Deko had come, he had found her in the yard under the mulberry tree, where she had taken a table and was writing in a thick red notebook. When she saw Deko she closed the book, but the boy saw the title written in big letters on top of the front page: «Thoughts of Great Men on Life.» She appeared tired, disheartened as if she had been suffering for many days, so Deko refrained from the usual small talk and only asked her if they had decided anything. «Nothing, my dear Adem. That must be our destiny.» Deko was surprised that she had called him «Adem» and not «Deko» as usual.

## 2

Several comrades had gathered in Drita's house. Deko entered quietly and sat down beside Rexha who was kneeling by the door. He was surprised to see Uncle Jazi who ought to have been in Peza. The old man was sitting beside Zef listening with one

hand at his cheek and wiping his tears with a big handkerchief.

«What a loss! What a terrible loss!» sighed the old man now and then.

Deko asked Rexha with his eyes why the old man was crying.

«Don't you know uncle Jazi?» asked Rexha in a whisper.

«I know him, of course. But what is the matter with him?»

«It is about Piciruku.»

«Why? Was Piciruku anything to him?»

«No, but he loved him more than a son.»

Zef offered the old man the last cigarette he had in his package.

«That is the way with these things, uncle. Many have fallen and many more will fall before liberty is won. Tears do no good.»

The old man did not like the mention of «tears».

«I don't shed tears so easily, my son, but it hurts me too much ... What a boy, what a fine brave boy! So it is two weeks since he was killed ... Didn't the communiqué mention it?»

«No, uncle.»

«Why?»

«Because it was his fault. He was killed as he shouldn't have been killed.»

«But he was brave, you can take my word for it.»

«Brave he was, but the Party does not demand only courage; it demands carefulness, tact, and above all discipline ...»

Uncle Jazi was taken aback. He looked at Zef expecting a longer explanation, but as Zef did not speak, he murmured with a sigh:

«Perhaps you are right... yes... The Party knows best. That is what everybody says...»

Zef looked at his watch.

«It is getting late,» he said and glanced at Alert.



«Late,» agreed Alert and put the letter he had just finished writing in an envelope. «He is expecting us at six o'clock.»

«At Uncle Kristo?»

«Yes.»

«Let us go then.»

Zef got to his feet.

«That is how it is, uncle Lazi,» he turned again to the old man and gave him his hand. «Now I will ask you to expose yourself as little as possible and for the time being not to return to your house with your family.»

«Why?»

«I think it is the best way. We must be cautious despite the fact that the enemy has lost his head. Many families have come back from Peza lately and that will certainly be noticed. Is that clear? So long!»

As he was going out, Zef noticed Deko standing beside Rexha.

«Why are you here?» he asked him.

«I had a word with Alert, comrade Zef, but it can wait, I can come back tomorrow.»

«Tomorrow?» Zef paused a moment. «No. Who knows what tomorrow will bring. You'd better come along with us.»

They came out in pairs in opposite directions: Zef and Alert by the street door towards the Lana River, Rexha and Deko by the small back door that led to the Tinker's street.

At uncle Kristo's house they entered through a small door which Deko did not know. He was surprised to find that they were in the familiar yard of Uncle Kristo's. The old man was watering his flowers

with a rubber hose at the other end of the yard near the street door and paid no attention to them.

They went up the stairs and in the guest room, where a young man, elegantly dressed, was sitting at the table looking with curiosity at the photos in an album.

«Rexha?» he asked getting to his feet.

«Yes.» We are together with this comrade.

«I know him,» said the young man. «Your name is Deko, isn't it?»

Deko was surprised. He did not know the man?

«Don't you remember me!» said the young man smiling. I am Topçe, Topçe of the other day.» He stepped towards the small door in the wall, raised the curtain and invited the comrades in.

It was a small room, rounded on one side and with a small balcony that looked over the back part of the yard. A big lamp with a shade in the form of a sunflower was hanging from the ceiling so low that Rexha had to lower his head to avoid it.

«That Rexha here has grown without knowing where to stop,» — said Zef smiling to a man about 35 years of age, rather short but stocky, who was sitting on a sofa near the balcony. The man got up holding with one hand the jacket he had thrown over his shoulder and embraced Rexha with the other.

«So much the better,» he said. «The tall ones are needed now for our artillery. You know that Frederick of Prussia did not accept for his artillery men under two meters tall.»

Then he turned to Deko.

«And this comrade, who is he? I don't remember to have seen him before.»

Deko stepped towards him and extended both his hands. He was completely confused. He was sure that the man before him was a leader, but he could not tell who he was.

«This is Deko,» said Zef with an easy manner of familiarity.

«Deko? So this is Deko ... I imagined him much bigger... But it doesn't matter. Gold is also small but its value is high, they say ... How are you, comrade Deko? ... And how is that black-haired beauty of yours? Is she still holding her nose as high as ever?»

He poured his questions in quick succession, giving Deko no time to answer. Deko, confused and surprised by the manner of that man who seemed to know so much about him, flushed violently and drops of perspiration covered his face. He glanced at Zef, then at Alert, who was standing with a tract in his hand by the balcony, and as none of them moved, he lowered his head.

«Answer to comrade Hysen. Are you ashamed to answer his questions?» said Zef at last. «He is a veteran of the District Committee of Tirana and is coming from the Central Committee.»

Instead of replying, Deko opened his eyes wide and stared with amazement at Comrade Hysen.

He was amazed and happy. First, because he met a man about whom he had heard many wonderful things, and second, because the presence of comrade Hysen in Tirana was surely connected with new developments, probably with the last decisive stages of the war, with the dawn of freedom that was approaching.

He saw for a moment his Tirana liberated, he heard the marching and the songs of the partisans in the streets, he saw thousands of red flags waving from the roof of the houses, the walls and the telephone poles, he saw endless columns of people pouring into the squares shouting and singing, he saw that imp of his Drita darting among the crowd, her face alight with joy, and he also saw there on the well known street the pale face of Emira Velo, frightened by the bright light of the dawn, hiding behind the door and watching with eyes that had lost all hope ...

He raised his head and with sparkling eyes cried to Hysen:

«The black-haired beauty is no longer what she used to be. Her nose is no longer high in the air, particularly of late.»

«But you must be very careful,» continued comrade Hysen. «She is a sly bourgeois, and you should not trust her.»

Deko felt hot all over. He had expected a remark of that kind. He looked at Zef as if to ask for his help, but Zef was looking aside with an expression of complete indifference. Then he decided that it was up to him to explain his position, weighing carefully his words:

«I have taken everything into consideration, Comrade Hysen.»

Hysen left his jacket on the sofa, sat down and invited the others to take their seats.

«We have another matter to talk about,» he said. «A matter of great importance in the moments we are living.

The others took out their notebooks in leaves of paper folded in two, Deko pulled out a school notebook and with a pencil in his hand fixed his eyes on Hysen. Rexha had already been prepared with a fountain pen and a fine notebook with leather cover. As soon as Hysen began to speak, Rexha bent his head over his notebook and began to write quickly without raising his eyes.

### 3

Although he had not slept at all that night, Deko came out from Uncle Kristo's house in the morning feeling fresh and reposed. The weather was fine. Drops of

dew were sparkling in the grass and on the tree leaves. «It seems as if it has rained in the night,» he thought. He took a deep breath and started. The street was quiet between the two rows of house walls. The white enamelled numbers of the houses, even numbers on one side, odd numbers on the other, glided swiftly beside him. The street of the Red Hill, with the police office at its far end, was also quiet. Deko was the first to be out in it, and it was not reassuring, but he was not thinking of the danger at that moment. He had guessed right that the presence of Comrade Hysen in Tirana was linked with new important events. Last night's meeting, Hysen's instructions, the measures that were to be taken and the expected changes were all signs of the preparations for the final phase of the war. The party organization of Tirana had its particular duties in that new phase. That made him happy, but it also made him think. It had been decided that the more experienced comrades of the District Committee, like Zef, Alert and Rexha, should go out of the town. A new town committee was to be set up and in it Deko was assigned a number of important duties, one of which was to organize the struggle behind the lines when the partisan attack on the capital started.

From the time when he took part in a guerilla unit in Tirana Deko had learned much about the means and methods of that kind of warfare, but now the time had come to put his knowledge into practice. It was not only Deko and his comrades, the members of the Party and of the sympathizer's groups, who had to be organized and prepared but it was also the masses of the people, who had to be taught to strike where it was least expected, to defend themselves, to watch the movements of the Germans and to report them in time, to keep a vigilant eye on the quislings and renegades and to prevent them from doing harm. For that purpose Deko had to gather all

the responsables of the cells, to explain to them the situation and to assign their duties. Each of them would then do the same work among the comrades of the cells, then among the groups of sympathizers, so that the instructions of the Party should reach the entire population. It was important that at the first meeting with the cell leaders he should explain clearly the situation, but more important still was that he should inspire them with the same joy and ardour which he was feeling himself since last night's meeting with Comrade Hysen.

Some of the responsables of the cells had been, not long ago members of his groups of sympathizers. He had to let them know, that he had spoken personally with Comrade Hysen and, what was more important, to explain to them that Hysen had received the new instructions directly from Comrade Taras. Some of them might not know who comrade Taras was. If anyone should ask who he was, then Deko would stand up and ask him half seriously: «How long have you been a party member?» The comrade would reply, let's say, one month and a half or two months «Since one month and a half you are in the Party and you still don't know who comrade Taras is? This is inadmissible!» Deko would say. Then he would tell them everything he had heard about him. It would be fine if even Drita did not know who Taras was. «But that is impossible,» he said to himself. «He ought to have asked her before...» She is a good girl, nobody can deny it», he concluded.

Deko had come too close to the police office, and whichever way he took, to the right or to the left, he would be noticed, and that might cause trouble. It might be dangerous because of the notes he was carrying. He should have thought of it earlier and taken another direction, but now it was too late. A gendarme appeared at the door, when he noticed Deko

he raised his head and muttered something. Deko decided on the spot what he had to do and walked straight to the gendarme, showing him his identity card.

«What is this?» asked the gendarme without moving.

«My identity card». They told us that we must come here to have another seal put on it. Isn't it here that they seal them?»

The gendarme, who was holding an unlighted cigarette in his mouth, shook his head annoyed.

«Do you have a match?» he asked. «That's what I want to know.»

«Yes, I have.» Deko took out his box of matches, lighted the cigarette of the gendarme and gave him the whole box.

«You are giving it to me?» the gendarme asked contented and blew a small cloud of smoke out of his mouth. «Thank you! I was getting mad. I have stood here the whole night without a smoke ... where do you come from?»

«From Fier».

«From Fier? I know Fier like the palm of my hand. My wife is from Fier ... And what are you doing here, in Tirana?»

«I have a handcart. But I don't earn much with it.»

«At least you are your own master. Not like me. They have left me here the whole night, and no sign of a man anywhere ...» Even the corporal who should have come to control me did not show up. Why, you may ask?» here the gendarme lowered his voice. «He is afraid for his own head, like the rest of them ...»

He put the box of matches in his pocket and shifted his weight from one foot to the other. Deko wanted to go away, but the man went on:

«I have had enough of it, by god, and I am worried because I have a crowd of children to feed, else ...»

He intercepted himself and looked around.

«Else what would you do?» asked Deko with a smile.

The gendarme stood a moment reflecting:

«I would hand my rifle to the corporal and try to find another job, what else could I do?»

«Well, I thought you might have other intentions,» said Deko laughing. «You might go to the mountains, for example, eh?»

«No, no! It isn't for me. There is a snag in it.»

«I don't know about that, but you can't hand back your rifle either, it can't be done.»

«Why?»

«Because the corporal will suspect something and take his measures, and it won't be easy for you.»

The gendarme frowned and looked Deko in the eyes as if expecting further explanations.

«That's how I see it, but I don't know much about these things,» said Deko hurriedly. «You asked me as a friend and I answered as a friend. Farewell, now, for my cart is waiting for me.

«Wait a minute, wait. I want to tell you something...» The gendarme took a folded yellow paper from his pocket and handed it to Deko. «Have a look at this first... They have printed it like a government document, the devils. Can you see what it is?»

Deko read the appeal of the Division with feigned curiosity.

«That is interesting, isn't it? How the devil do they distribute them?»

The gendarme laughed:

«A little imp, one of those who sell peanuts. He came here and handed it to me. He said he had found it lying on the street.»

«On the street?» — Deko murmured scratching his head as if he could not believe it. «Don't you think that they might have sent the small boy, themselves?»

«No. Why? Who could have sent him?»



«They, I mean, those who have written it, the partisans.»

The gendarme looked at him again perplexed. Then he shrugged his shoulders and added doubtfully.

«It must be as you say. I didn't think of it. But what do you think, are the partisans in earnest about us for the gendarmerie, or do they want to take us in. The corporale pictured them as black as hell.»

«The corporal... Deko pursed up his lips... Why should you care what the corporal says? Perhaps he has committed sins that can't be washed off.»

«Sins, you say? Do you know who corporal Bra-hja is? There was only one who could match him, corporal Noga, and he disappeared so that nobody knows where he ended...»

«Well, that's what I was saying. You mustn't listen to what your corporal says. You must do what suits you best. Perhaps you have some friends who are in the same position. Get together and see what they think about it. The more you are, the better. It won't surprise me if that little scamp shows up again. You see what I mean?»

The gendarme nodded thoughtfully, looking aside.

«It is time for me to be going,» added Deko looking at his wrist watch. «So long.»

«Farewell,» said the gendarme and followed the boy with his eye until he turned the corner at the end of the boulevard. Then he scratched his head as a thought occurred to him: «What a fine watch he had, the devil... And he said he was working with a handcart... Funny... Well, it is none of my business, let me smoke another cigarette, then I will see what I will do...»

He took out the box of matches, shook it to see if it had enough matches and was satisfied. «It is quite full.» He lighted a cigarette, sat down cross-legged on the ground with his rifle across his knees and his back against the wall.

When corporal Brahja came a few minutes later, he found the gendarme asleep with the cigarette still burning between his fingers. He looked angrily at the gendarme, pulled carefully the rifle from him and gave him a hard vicious kick on the knee.

4

In the early hours of the afternoon, having accomplished practically all the tasks he had in his plan, Deko laid down tired and sweating on the scrubbed floor of mother Sadete's room. The sun was shining bright through the small windows. He pulled out his block of notes and saw that he had scratched out all but the last of the items of his plan, the one he had added later, after he had parted from the gendarme. It said: «To the Philosopher about the gendarme».

He should have seen to it earlier, then he could have slept one or two hours afterwards. But now there was no time for sleep. He had to find the Philosopher and tell him about that gendarme. He couldn't put it off till tomorrow; it would be too dangerous. But where could he find the boy? He hadn't seen him lately, and the comrades he had met knew nothing about him. Deko had to look for him at Neki-je's house behind the Shën Prokop Hill. He got up with some effort, but when he was out in the street he felt his body light and full of energy; perhaps it was the effect of the light breeze that was whispering through the leaves of the acacias alongside the street. «Movement is life,» he remembered Alert's words. Of course Alert must have borrowed them from some of the books he read. Zef, on the contrary, preferred to illustrate his thoughts with concrete exam-

ples. «Movement? It is like the sea in a storm, untrained and refreshing, while quiet like marsh water, stagnant and foul...» And to think that I wanted the sleep! I must have been crazy!»

He could take a short-cut to the Philosopher's house by crossing the boulevard, but the boulevard was not safe for Deko and his comrades. It had become like a meeting place for the Germans of the Feldgendarmerie and the mercenaries of the «Balli» and the «Legality», perhaps because they felt more secure when they were together. Although now they were frightened and demoralized, they had not given up their «trade». The wolf may lose his teeth but never his nature. Zef had been quite right to caution Uncle Llazi against carelessness even though the «enemy» were losing their head.»

So Deko pulled his cap over his eyes and took the way that passed by the new prison. The breeze had changed into a strong wind which raised clouds of dust and drove them with force against his eyes. It blew even harder in the street beyond the prison where the houses were scattered and left wider empty spaces between each other. He buttoned his collar and turned his back to the cloud of dust that was flying at him. Then Deko saw a fine carriage drawn by two horses coming from behind and thought he recognized the face that looked at him from under the hood. «It must be her,» thought Deko, «where the devil is she going in this heat?» The carriage bypassed him, but some ten paces farther it pulled up. Emira Velo stepped out of it and waved at him with her hand.

«Come,» she said, «Are you going to Lapraka too? We have a place for you. We are quite alone, only Ajeta and I. We are going to Mr. Backa on a visit of congratulation, but in fact we have another business with him...as you may know...» she added as an afterthought. «We are trying to arrange for Ajeta to be released from that disgraceful mobilization. Won't you come with us?»

«No, thank you. I must stop here. I was going to my cousin, to that house over there... The one with the tin roof.»

«Well, in that case...» She took off the white straw hat with the blue ribbons that were fluttering like butterflies in the wind. She seemed calm and cheerful as he had not seen her for almost two years. «She looks very attractive when she smiles», he thought.

«As for the matter we talked about the other day,» she continued, «we may yet discuss it, perhaps pretty soon.» She leaned closer to him and added in a confidential tone: «I think Ajeta is inclined to accept your suggestions, but he has not decided as yet. Much will depend on the attitude of Mr. Backa.»

Emira shook hands with him, put on her hat, took her seat in the carriage and waved her hand at him; then with her face suddenly sad and with a catch in her voice she said «Adio!»

«To Mr. Backa! A fine place to go! You better go to the hell!» thought Deko indignantly:



There was a big lock on the outside of the door of Nekije's house. The brown cat that had been lying in front of the door ran to meet him, but realizing that he was a stranger, it drew back miaowing plaintively and stood off despite his inviting words and gestures.

«I should have thought of that before I started. Who can't use his head must use his feet,» he said to himself. He went around the house, saw some washing hanging on a line in the back yard, noticed the Philosopher's mended shorts and thought that Nekije should be back soon. It was nearly four o'clock. That meant that he had still two hours before curfew. He could

lie down in that maize field and rest. But he was afraid he might fall asleep and wake up too late. He had summoned the responsible on the cells to a meeting at six o'clock at the house of Mother Sadete. No, that would not do. He came again to the front of the house. He knew that his turning around the house could arouse suspicions; that's why the wisest thing he could do was to go away, though he regretted to have to go like that without meeting anybody, having taken the trouble to come all the way to Nekije's house and yet he had to go. At that moment he heard the cat jump up and rush away towards the road from where the Philosopher appeared wearing a cardboard cap and boy scout's shorts.

When he saw Deko he stopped, pushed the cat aside with his foot and motioned to his comrade to stay where he was.

Deko took a breath of relief.

«Where have you been?» he asked.

«To a meeting.»

«A meeting?» Deko said it with a slightly derisive tone. «And what did you discuss at that meeting of yours?»

The Philosopher shook his head.

«These things are not supposed to be revealed to others,» he said and began to unlock the door with a piece of wire he had in his pocket.

«Are you going to keep it secret from me?»

«That is what that comrade of the Party who spoke to us said.»

He opened the door and they went in. The Philosopher took off his cap and threw it on the sofa.

«So, that is how it is. And who was the comrade who spoke to you?»

«That can't be told either.»

Deko noticed that the boy began to blush and changed the subject.

«It is all right. I have come for another matter.

Have you noticed a gendarme, rather dumb, at the police office of the Red Hill?»

«I have... His name is Muka.» The Philosopher smiled, showing two dimples on his cheeks. «Have you spoken to him? Of course, it must have been you. I was wondering who that fellow could be who works with a handcart... I went to him again this afternoon. The corporal had thrashed him because he had found him sleeping on duty. He is ready to run away but he needs our help. He said he can take two rifles and a box of hand grenades, what can we do?

«It can be arranged,» said Deko with satisfaction. «You have done a fine job,» and he patted the boy on the shoulder. «I must be going now, we can meet tomorrow, at nine o'clock, at Drita's.»

«Are you going so soon? No. You must wait for Mother,» insisted the Philosopher. «She won't be long. What time is it?

«Five,» said Deko who had already looked at his watch several times. «But at six o'clock I have to be at the wood market.

«You will manage. Mother will be here in a quarter of an hour. I am sure she will have news for you.»

Deko's curiosity was aroused.

«What news?»

The Philosopher took his time and, lowering his voice as if afraid to be overheard, whispered:

«They have had a big meeting today, the big shots of the «Balli,» at the house where Mother is working.»

Netka came home at twenty past five. There had been a meeting at Mr. Backa's house and she had seen

all sorts of people coming, most of them well dressed, with hats and canes, with watch chains across their waistcoats or gold watches on their wrists, with shining shoes and snow-white shirts, with starched collars and fine neckties, but some of them were wearing peasant's clothes and there were one or two with corduroy trousers. Some of them wore black fezes instead of hats, some more white fezes, two wore mountaineer's costumes richly embroidered with thick black thread and small white caps like bird nests on top of their heads. Those latter ones wore also broad red belts from which protruded the silver chiselled butts of their old pistols. The scene had reminded her of the time when Galip Bey received his guests on special occasions.

Mr. Backa had let it be known that he was celebrating a special occasion, that he had received through the Red cross a letter from his only son whom he had long given up for dead. The boy happened to be alive and well somewhere in South America. In fact they had not heard from him for nearly twenty years, and Miss Edda, who was incapable of keeping her mouth shut, had told Nekije that the letter was only a pretext, and while the gathering had been arranged for quite a different purpose, and had given Nekije a significant wink.

Nekije did not need the girl's confidence to understand that this was not a festive reception. Who would expect Safet Bey to celebrate without special preparation? Even when he invited that German Major Ficht to dinner he would bring waiters and cooks from «Dajti» Hotel and turn the house upside down, whereas now he had not ordered a single case of beer. There were in the house only two or three bottles of sweetened liquors, of the one that ladies prefer, as well as one or two boxes of chocolate candy. But all that was of course far from enough for a big celebration.

Nekije was not allowed to enter the room where the guests were gathered. Miss Edda was supposed to look after their needs, although her service was limited to emptying the ash trays every ten or fifteen minutes. But when one of the guests asked for a glass of water, the girl sent Nekije to bring the pitcher that had been left to cool in the well. Edda took it from Nekije's hands and went back into the room leaving the door half closed, and Nekije could take a glimpse of the people seated along the walls smoking cigarettes and talking. The first to catch her eye was a tall man past his prime, dressed all in white, with a high starched collar and an exaggerated large necktie. His sandy eyebrows were thick and graying, as was his hair. He was standing upright holding a piece of paper in his hand and was turning his head right and left while he was talking. The others were listening in respectful silence, some with their eyes on the floor, some looking straight at him.

Nekije could hear only his last words which he had pronounced with particular emphasis: «The English will soon come to our aid, and the Germans have no objection to their landing. This is great achievement, my dear friends, only it must remain strictly...» Nekije had not been able to hear distinctly his last word.

«Entre nous»! laughed Deko «It must surely have been «Entre nous». It is French and it means 'between us'. It is Mithat Bey's favourite expression, you know Mit'hat Bey, the Ballist leader.»

«Mithat Bey, of course!» cried Nekije. «I know it was him even before that girl told me his name. You should see how they listened to him, as if the almighty himself was speaking. Later the girl told me that only Abaz Kupa had opposed him on some points. It seems they could not agree on who should take the power when the Germans were gone! Ahmet Zog or the Ballists. They had bickered long over that.



The Philosopher, who had been listening to his mother's account in silence, shook his head and sighed.

«Eh, Mother, if I had been there...»

«What would you have done, my boy?»

«I would have told them: 'Don't quarrel in vain, all of you. Let me better tell you who will take the power.' Then I would have sung loudly the song:

'Over the bodies of the traitors shall we pass...'

Nekije laughed happily.

«You are quite right,» Deko gave him a pat on the shoulder. «That is how we shall pass indeed.» Then he shook hands with Nekije. «He would have liked to stay a little longer with them but he had no time. At the door he stooped for a moment:

«I forget to ask you, Netka; didn't you see anybody you know among those people?

«The one with the black locks,» said Nekije touching the hair above her forehead to indicate the way Emira Velo wore her hair. «She came all dressed up with her brother a little before the meeting ended.»

«They did not enter while the meeting was on?»

«No, they didn't. But when the meeting was over and the guests began to leave, Mit'hat Bey and Mr. Backa stayed behind and talked with her in the corridor. I could not hear what they were saying, but the girl was smiling and nodding her head when Mit'hat Bey was talking.

— The vixen! hissed Deko through his clenched teeth and once more shook hands with Nekije, «We will meet again tomorrow, Netka. I will let you know the hour and the place. And you, little fellow,» he ran his fingers through the Philosopher's ruffled hair. «You won't forget to come tomorrow at nine o'clock at Drita's. Is that clear?»

The Philosopher stood at attention and soluted with his fist.

## CHAPTER XIV

### 1

Zef Moisiu heard the first part of Deko's report smoking one cigarette after another and taking no notes, as he used to do on such occasions. But whenever Deko finished an item and looked at him to see if he had any remark to make, Zef expressed in few words his opinion or nodded to Deko to go on.

«Go on,» he said when he heard the part of the report about the activity of the youth organizations. Deko took a breath of relief. That was one of the points that worried him most, not because he had not worked well with the youth, but, in his opinion, ever since a large number of young people from Tirana had joined the ranks of the partisans, a certain disorder had been noticed in their meetings, and their actions were not what they had been some months before. Deko was disappointed mostly about the «Call for Freedom» which had not been published after the arrest of Epos.

Zef's remark on the question of the «Call» was limited to a short explanation that it was connected with the central leadership of the youth organization which had lately been transferred to the south for reasons of a special importance.

Criticism came, however, where Deko least expected it, on the question of the National-Liberation councils. The activity of the councils was the last item of his report, and Deko had treated it as a problem which did not deserve much attention. His first words on that problem were: «I will add a few words about the National-Liberation councils, although their activity is

not as important as the other problems.» And he dealt with it very briefly indeed.

«I don't agree with you in this point, Comrade Deko,» said Zef frowning and lighted a cigarette. «You have treated superficially the role that the National-Liberation council must play, particularly from now on. Is that how you have understood the decisions of the Congress of Përmet? That is very wrong on your part...»

Deko had never been subjected to such severe criticism from Comrade Zef. The words «I don't agree with you...» and «That is very wrong...» sounded so hard that he involuntarily dropped his notes and forgot to pick them up.

He wanted to say frankly that this was the first time he heard someone speak so seriously about the importance of the National-Liberation councils, but that would sound as an accusation against the other members of the district committee with whom he had been in contact, so he decided to accept the criticism patiently. It was terrible to leave such a bad impression on Zef without explaining or justifying himself. Of course, Deko was going to put right his error, but Zef was going away and who knew when they could meet again. Perhaps he would report the matter to Hysen and spoil the good opinion Hysen had about Deko.

Deko had no heart to continue his report. He had planned to please Zef with his report about his adventure with the gendarme Muka, who by now might have left his post with two of his friends and a case of hand grenades. Besides he had meant to tell Zef what he had heard about the meeting at Mr. Backa's house and particularly about Emira Velo who indeed was going to end the way Zef had predicted that night at their meeting with Hysen and Alert... But now the whole matter had taken an unexpected turn, and any talk of an entertaining character would be quite out of place.

«Listen now!» Zef unexpected changed his tone. Deko was surprised to see his face again frank, sympathetic and smiling. «I see you feel hurt, don't you?»

«No, Comrade Zef, but...»

«Drop that now. Say frankly that you were hurt. It is no shame to tell the truth. It is a shame to try to evade the truth.

«Well, a little, yes,» admitted Deko.

«Let it be a little, then, it does not matter. But I want you to understand me correctly in another sense.» Zef bent down and picked up the notes of the report. «My criticism does not concern you directly but Alert and Rexha with whom you have been in contact and who ought to have helped you on that question of the National Liberation councils. Tonight I will see them and talk to them, but apart from that, you have your own obligations as a communist and you must remember well what I have told you before. The Party has trusted you with very responsible duties and that makes it necessary for you to understand deeply its policy, to live with it every day and every hour of your life, to study and analyse it on every side and to draw the right conclusions that will help you in taking decisions and in instructing the others. Do you understand what I mean? The way you and the few comrades you have with you will conduct your activity these days may determine the fate of the 40,000 inhabitants of the town and, why not, the liberation of our Tirana.»

Deko's heart was overflowing with joy and exaltation.

«You see what I mean?» asked Zef kindly.

«I see, thank you. And I also realize that your criticism was quite right and that I need it, Comrade Zef.»

«You needed it... Very well. Go on with your report now.»

Deko needed several minutes to set right in his mind the four items under the title «Miscellaneous» with which he ended his report. To each of the items he had added a few figurative words like those the «People's Voice» used when it aimed its shafts at the reactionaries. It went like that:

1 A small bush can hide a big hare (the Philosopher and the gendarme).

2 Mit'hat Bey expects mama from heaven (meeting at Mr. Backa's).

3 A magpie can't abandon her nest (Emira), etc.

Zef had noticed these phrases when he had picked up the notes and expected Deko to report on them with his usual humour, as he had often done at the meetings with his comrades. But although Deko had intended to end his report in a humorous note, he did not succeed. All the funny phrases he had prepared on the way which had made him laugh by himself had dispersed and he was unable to link them together. So he ended by reporting the last items in a ordinary way, as he had done with the rest of the report.

Zef listened attentively and even took some notes about the meeting at Mr. Backa's.

«You must avoid all contact with that man unless you receive special instructions,» he warned Deko. «If any contact will be needed, someone else will be charged with it. It is possible that he has a finger in the murder of Piciruk,» he added darkly.

«Of Piciruk?» Deko's face turned pale and he gripped his breast with his hand as if he had felt something break down.

«Yes, of Piciruk! Of that madcap!... You should not be surprised. Don't you know that the most dangerous enemies are those who throw the stone and hide their hand behind their back?»

Deko said nothing, and for a moment they were both silent. Then with uncertain movements Deko

stretched his hand, picked up his notes, folded them and put them in his pocket.

«Wasn't there a fourth item in the end?» Zef reminded him.

Deko shook his head as if to reproach himself leaving it out.

«Ah, yes,» he said and pulled out his notes. «It was about that girl... It seems to me she is again at her old tricks. Although...»

He told Zef briefly how he had met with Emira Velo and about her visit to Mr. Backa on the day of the big meeting, as well as about her talk with Mithat Bey and finally asked Zef's opinion on what they could do with «that reactionary».

«As with the rest of them,» replied Zef coldly. But when he saw Deko shrug his shoulders as if he could not understand his exact meaning, he added: «In my opinion, her case is quite clear and it is not worth while troubling our heads about her any more... But you... You can use your own judgement in her case... I don't want to hear anything about her any more.»

Zef pronounced the last words with his teeth clenched and with an expression of hatred that surprised Deko.

2

The next morning the street of Evgjenia's house looked dumb, but inside the house, two months of being almost deserted, there was a lively movement of illegals who had come silently, some the night before, some in the early hours of the morning.

In the small room with the windows looking over

the garden Zef was presiding over the last meeting with the comrades. It was not a regular meeting with a fixed agenda and a report, but a short meeting in which Zef announced his departure from Tirana and wanted to repeat the instructions he had given those last days. Alert and Rexha, who also were going to leave Tirana, a little later, were listening with their eyes lowered and their arms crossed, while Deko and the others were taking notes feverishly.

Opposite Zef, between two young men who were seen for the first time with him, was sitting another young man, older than the others, as his more mature face and the lines on it showed him to be. Zef noticed his civilian clothes, his new cap, the newly ironed shirt and the two fountain pens in the breast pocket of his jacket. He was listening with concentration and from time to time was taking notes in a notebook. His face was not entirely unfamiliar to Zef.

For a moment Zef came closer to the fellow, glanced at his notes, recognizing the neat handwriting he had often seen in the past. Then he asked permission from the comrades and turned to the fellow:

"Aren't you Comrade Skampa?"

The young man stood up and blushed.

"Yes, Comrade Zef. We have met once at an activist's meeting."

"Yes, of course. I am ashamed to admit, that I had forgotten you and knew you just now only by your handwriting. Zef took the young man's block of notes, in his hands, admired for a moment the beautiful handwriting and continued: "This handwriting has become as familiar to us as our daily bread, Comrade Skampa. But you ought to be more careful about yourself, more cautious..."

In the next big room with the two big windows looking over the yard which was used as a guest room, Drita and Bimi had opened a big sack with clothing left there by Evgjenia and were sorting out flannels,

trousers, boots, stockings... Whenever finding something of a better quality they put it aside, but soon the pile of good things became so big that the bag they had prepared for them was too small to hold them.

«What shall we do now?» asked Bimi perplexed.

«We shall have to ask Evgenia for a bigger bag,» replied Drita.

«How funny you are!... Do you think Zef will take with him a truck full of these things?»

«But he will need them, Comrade Bimi.»

«Need them? Of course he will need them. But he will have to pass through the road block, and you can't trifle with the Germans.»

They regretfully set aside some of the less necessary things. Drita was most sorry about a pair of Alpine boots which would fit Zef perfectly and were almost new... And still the bag was too small for what remained.

«Help me to pack them in, Bimi. You are the stronger.»

— Pack them? Don't you hear something cracking inside? I am afraid we have broken the field glasses.»

They emptied the bag again. The field glasses were all right, but a metallic vessel like a yellow aluminium had given in and they heard the sound of broken glass when they shook it.

«He won't need that,» said Drita.

«Why not? It may be an instrument that he needs.»

«What instrument! It is only a thermos for cold water. No partisan needs any thermos.»

They both laughed.

Evgenia, who also had been looking in her closet for things that Zef would need, came into the room with her hands full. She wanted to sit down but found it difficult and asked them to help her.

«We want nothing more. We have no place for your



things," said Drita as she helped Evgjenia to put her things on the floor.

"Do you intend to send Zef away without any cigarettes or medicines?"

Evgjenia opened the two big packages she had brought. One of them was full of different packets of cigarettes while the other contained a bottle of jodine, some small packages of cotton and a number of paper envelopes with all sorts of tablets on which she had written clearly the name of the tablets and the way they should be used.

"We can't let him go without these," she said.

"They don't need these things over there, Gjena," said Bimi laughing. "The English drop as much as you like of these with parachutes."

"The English?" Evgjenia frowned at him. "You can't be serious. In that case you know nothing about the conditions in which the partisans live. You ask me and I will tell you, because I have been through all the villages of Peza and have served in a partisan hospital. The English, indeed! They drop poison, poison! Didn't you know it?"

She turned angrily around and saw Zef and Alert who had come in and were watching them with curiosity.

"What were you quarrelling about?" asked Zef laughing.

Drita explained.

"No, no! You have it all wrong," said Zef. "All I need is that pair of boots, the field glasses and some of Gjena's medicines, nothing else."

He looked out from the window and laughed as he saw Risto coming along the street in his short-sleeved white shirt, his hair neatly combed and his trousers ironed to perfection, holding a copy of the "Unity of the Nation" under his arm and strutting like those young dandies who are anxious to draw the attention of young ladies.

«Take a look at him,» said Zef laughing to Evgjenia. «Doesn't he look like a dandy of twenty-five? And you complain that he is getting old!»

Risto unlocked the door and entered into the yard still keeping his air of tranquility and bliss, but as soon as he came in the room he threw the paper on the ground, ruffled his hair and crumpled his shirt as if he had hardly been able to maintain his pose of elegance, then he drew a deep breath as if to relieve himself from a heavy burden and turned to Zef.

«I did everything you asked me to do... The Philosopher is waiting for you at the corner of the «Pariani» Street and is carefully watching it for a hundred metres as far as that woman's house opposite the road-block... In the house you will find the peasant... There you will change your clothes and will wait until the gendarme who knows Deko comes to take over the guard duty. Bimi will take charge of that... The rest... you know yourself.»

Zef nodded.

«Very well,» he said and looked at his watch. «I'd better be going now. Death to fascism and... till we meet again in liberated Tirana!

Drita did not stir. She was holding a black cotton dress folded over her forearm and was standing waiting.

«What are you waiting for?» asked Zef.

She quickly pulled over her head the black «çarçaf» dress, and arranged it so that only her eyes were visible and in a few seconds she took the appearance of a girl belonging to an old-fashioned fanatic Muslem family.

Risto did not take his eyes off her until she and Zef disappeared in the street.

## CHAPTER XV

### 1

In his movements about the streets of Tirana Zef had always been very cautious and watchful, and although he kept his eyes straight ahead, he could always manage to have a quick eye right and left and take mental note of what he saw. But this time, with the Philosopher walking twenty meters ahead and Drita by his side, he could remember nothing of what he had seen on the way from Risto's house to the house opposite the roadblock that was to be his last base before leaving Tirana.

Instead of watching attentively around him, he kept his eyes on Drita who had concentrated all her attention to the task she had been given and on the Philosopher with his thin neck and his big basket, who was acting his part of reconnoitering so perfectly that one would think he had taken a special course in it.

When they reached the square before the roadblock, the Philosopher stopped and bent down to pick up a horn of peanuts he had dropped on purpose. Zef saw the movement of his head towards the house in which Zef was to go and the smile that was meant as a farewell. Zef drew closer to Drita and they both entered quickly into the house.

In the yard they saw the peasant who was going to accompany Zef. The man was standing holding a hoe in his hand and carrying a milk can slung over his shoulder. Zef nodded to him as to someone he did not know, but when the man nodded back and smiled, Zef recognized his old friend Rrem Gursi.

It was cool in the room where the man led him.

Zef sat down by the window that overlooked the square in front of the roadblack hoping to take a last glance at the Philosopher.

«He is gone,» said Drita. «His business is with Bimi now, but he will be back in ten minutes.»

So ten minutes passed, then twenty, and still there was no sign of the Philosopher or Bimi.

«I think I must go out myself,» said Drita. «I will go to Risto's house and find out what has happened.»

Zef consented half-heartedly.

When the girl was gone he looked around the room and then at the photographs of panoramas cut out from some illustrated magazines that had been framed and hung on the walls. But his thoughts were elsewhere. He was thinking of the street they had just crossed and of the Philosopher. He had been struck by the expression on the boy's face when he had smiled to him. Zef drew the light sofa close to the window, sat down and began to write in his notebook. It was the first time after so many years that he was feeling the need to sit and write down in a diary his impressions of the moment.

Tirana, July 12. I parted with the Philosopher without embracing him. That made me feel bad. He showed me the way to this house and was off with a smile that I will never forget...

This is the second time I am leaving Tirana. Will I ever come back? And if I do, will I find the Philosopher? It is not that I have a particular presentiment, and if I did I would not believe in it, but I can't really tell what made me ask that question... There was a time when I used to scribble poetry, mostly love poetry. Now it is more than five years since I wrote the last verse. I have given it up, but am I completely free from the urge to write? I can't say. I would like to have a try at it once more. But it should not be verses like those of my colleague Orphens (what a pretentious pen name!) who continues to shed poetical

tears over his blond beauty. No, I would like to write about the smile of my little friend, the Philosopher, about his courage and devotion, about the full significance of that smile.

I have been waiting for over an hour, and Bimi is still not coming. Now he and Drita are the only links I have with the Tirana organization. Drita went to Risto's to see what is delaying them. Rrem Gurrsi is waiting in the yard crouching with his hoe in his hand and the milk can between his knees. He is leaning with his back against the wall rolling a cigarette from time to time. He must be bored, but whenever I make a sign from the window to tell him that I am sorry, he shakes his head and smiles as if to say: «It doesn't matter, I am used to it. I hope you are not annoyed yourself.» The housewife, though I have not met her before, is trying to entertain me by bringing me a cup of coffee every ten minutes. She told me that she has a boy in jail and is worried because of some rumours she has heard. Unfortunately, the rumours that the Germans intend to transfer the prisoners from Tirana to some concentration camp abroad are quite true but I have no heart to tell it to her.

Drita is finally coming back but she is alone and is shading her head with a folded copy of the «Unity of the Nation». I can see her well from my window. She is no longer wearing the black «çarçaf» but is dressed in the European fashion with a white linen low-necked dress, her lips reddened and wearing a necklace and a bracelet. That is bad sign... Something must have gone wrong...

Something had gone wrong, indeed.

«There has been some difficulty,» said Drita directly, still holding the paper in her hand. Rrem was craning his neck through the door trying to hear what she was saying.

«Come on, what is the matter?» asked Zef as he jumped to his feet and reached for his package of cigarettes.

«You won't have time to smoke,» said the girl anxiously although she was making an effort to keep calm. «They have blocked a part of the quarter behind this house and up to the boulevard and are searching the houses. The fact that Bimi did not come means that he must have been held up somewhere. Don't you think we should go away before it is too late?»

Zef did not reply. He emptied the pockets of his trousers and his jacket, gathered the papers he had in them in a pile, called the housewife and asked her:

«Can you hide these papers somewhere?»

«Yes, my son, I will hide them enough,» she said and took the papers away.

«All right, but which way can we go?» asked Zef.

«Straight before the roadblock,» said Drita resolutely. «If we can only pass it, the rest is easy. I will go first, then this comrade,» she pointed at Rrem, «then you can follow. There is only one gendarme at the roadblock and he does not seem to care who is passing. He may be the one about whom Bimi has spoken to you.»

Rrem Gurrasi came a little closer and said in a low voice:

«You have thought it out quite well. And if that policeman means trouble, I will start something to draw his attention on me.»

«I could give you the opportunity,» said the girl to whom a new idea had occurred. «You walk behind me and pretend to be angry... I will be your daughter who doesn't want to marry the man you have chosen for me...»

She put on the «çarçaf» of the housewife and walked out towards the roadblock. After her ran Rrem shouting threats, while Zef stood behind the door and watched.

The plan worked just as Drita had foreseen. As soon as he heard the «quarrel», the gendarme twirled his mustache and intervened, at first softly, then with «authority», putting the blame on the «father». But as they both still insisted, Rrem shouting and shaking menacingly his hoe, the gendarme ordered them to come into the office and sort it out peacefully or wait for the corporal, who was due shortly.

The quarrel continued inside for a while. The girl glanced from time to time from the window at the street that led to the river and to the fields. When she saw Zef turning to the right and into a garden, she turned to the gendarme in a tone of despair:

«That is all right, sir! I will do as you say. But I am afraid that father will beat me up when we go back home.»

The gendarme straightened up and thumped his chest proudly:

«You think so? And what am I here for? By god, I will give a hundred to him for every blow he gives you.» Then he looked severely at the peasant saying: «What do you say to that?»

Rrem opened his arms in a gesture of resignation:

«It will be as you say, sir. And as for the girl, I promise I won't touch a hair of her head.»

Contented that through his authority he had put an end to the «incident» between the peasant and his daughter, the gendarme twirled his mustache again, shook hands with both of them and saw them out.

Quiet fell on Risto's house as soon as Zef departed. The people there exchanged no words between them but just sat thinking and waiting.

Suddenly from the yard of an old cinema some three hundred metres from the house, which had recently been turned into a barracks for Ballist soldiers, came a gunshot followed immediately by angry shouts. Within two minutes the street before the house was filled with soldiers holding their rifles ready and dispersing in groups of three or four which began to knock on the doors of the houses with their fists and boots or to enter directly where they found the doors unlocked.

Risto, who had remained behind the door still thinking about Drita and Zef, as soon as he heard the shots and the soldiers rushing into the street, turned the key of the door and ran into the house.

«They are coming! What shall we do?» were his first words.

His wife looked at him reproachfully and put her finger over her lips to indicate that the comrades were jumping from the window of the other room into the garden of the neighbours, as Zef had done some time before.

Then she went to the street door which was almost breaking under the blows of the soldiers and began to excuse herself for being slow in opening the door and blaming in on the rusty lock. At last the key turned, the soldiers rushed in and surrounded her pointing their rifles at her:

«Tell us, who ran this way?» shouted one of them. Evgjenia crossed herself:

«This way! In our house? Nobody. We keep the door locked as we are quite alone, my husband and I. Come in and see for yourself.»



The man who had spoken first and had a ribbon with two stars sewn on the collar of his jacket, ordered the house to be searched, but then someone laughed from the street and cried loudly:

«Give it up now, lieutenant.»

The lieutenant turned his head and said tartly:

«No, why should I?»

«It is no use,» said the other. «It was only our captain, his gun went off by accident,» and laughed again.

But the soldiers in the other houses continued for some time their search for the man who had dared to fire his gun inside the barracks and had run away. From time to time, in the midst of the shouts and knocks came single gunshots which gave the alarm to the street patrols and to the other German and quisling forces.

At the door of the neighbour's house which led to the «Pariani» street Alert told the comrades to divide into three groups and to go out one after the other in short intervals, so as not to be surprised together by some unexpected patrol.

When he saw that the others were hesitating, Alert came out first, followed at a short distance by Rexha and Skampa. He was already in the narrow street across the «Pariani» street when a patrol of the Feldgendarmerie appeared from behind the barracks and marched towards the place where the others were preparing to cross the street.

Skampa had already gone over, but Rexha was still in the middle of the street when he saw the patrol of three coming towards him. He pretended not to have understood their intentions and continued to walk quickly towards the opposite side of the streets, without thinking that this would arouse their suspicions.

The leader of the patrol, a short and fat feldvebel with two strips on his right sleeve, who was not

carrying an automatic and was walking between his tall subordinates, raised his head angrily, pulled out his revolver and shouted to Rexha to stop. The two others also pointed their automatics at the young man. Rexha neither stopped nor ran, but only slowed down his steps, smiled at the patrol and opened his arms in a gesture of perplexity.

«Halt!» shouted the feldvebel with his finger on the trigger. The other two walked quickly towards Rexha, who had stopped and was staring at the muzzles of the approaching automatics. The beat of the heavy boots on the pavement was almost synchronous with the throbbing of his heart and his temples. He remembered that only a month before the same thing had happened to him at the roadblock on the 'Shëngjergji' street, but this time he was not carrying the revolver which had given him some courage the first time. And he could blame none other but himself for it. . .

The fat faldvebel put the revolver back in its holster and stood in front of Rexha, while the two feldgendarmes stood two steps behind him with their automatics ready. The moment he reached with his hands to search the boy, from the cracks of a wall behind him he heard the rapid shots of an automatic revolver. The feldvebel stepped back as if something had hit him, pulled out his revolver again and turned his face to the right. One of the gendarmes also turned around to the direction from where the shots had come, but the other one did not move; he only tightened his grip on his automatic.

When Rexha saw the feldvebel and the gendarme turn their heads aside, he did not think of the second gendarme who had not moved, but gathered his forces and sprang towards the entrance of the narrow street, but he stumbled on the sidewalk and fell on his back. He saw that this was the end and thought in a flash that a little slip of his foot made all the difference

between death and happy life among his comrades. It must have been one of them who had fired the shots to draw the attention of the Germans from him and they would certainly have thought of something else to divert the Germans while he was escaping through the narrow street. He looked up and saw the cruel grin of the feldgendarme standing above him with his automatic pointed at his head. The feldvebel and the other gendarme were also running towards him. Then he saw nothing else. He only heard a loud report and his body contrasted. The feldgendarme had emptied the whole clip of the automatic into him and was preparing another one.

## CHAPTER XVI

### 1

Three weeks later, in the middle of the activity that was keeping him busy day and night, Deko received a thick envelope with letters and documents that had been sent to him from the south. He recognized Zef's handwriting on the envelope and opened it immediately. Among the documents he found an appeal of the Anti-fascist Committee, a communiqué of the General Staff on the more important activities of the National Liberation Army during the month of July, instructions from Zef on the way these documents were

to be used, and an object which surprised Deko when he saw it. It was a notebook like the ones used in schools, wrapped in thin transparent paper and tied with a string. On the cover Zef had written in his clear legible handwriting: «To Comrade Deko with prayer to keep it at any cost.»

Deko refrained from opening it for the moment, but when he went home in the evening, he unwrapped it carefully and began to read the fine, almost microscopic handwriting with which Zef had written:

«Free zone, July 13. — I arrived at last at Peza, after two days of travelling with repeated breaks, but I have no news from Bimi who has not come at the appointed time. He must have good reasons to have missed the appointment. I am sure. — I am worried about him, although here I am quite comfortable.

I have experienced this kind of life eight or nine months ago, but then the conditions were quite different: the Germans had begun their first operation and we were in a tight corner. We had to hide in the woods during the day and then travel in the night, changing all the time our itinerary. Now everything has changed. In the shade of the trees and the high hills I often hear partisan songs or folk songs from different districts... A battalion commissar is speaking to a group of peasants under a walnut tree on a harvested cornfield. I hear the peasants clapping their hands and shouting and it seems to me that I am in another world. Only now I realize the hardships of illegal life in the towns. Poor Deko! And Bimi, is he safe and well?...

I look at my watch to see if it is near six, since they have told me that at six o'clock they are expecting the messenger Veli from Tirana. But my watch has stopped... I have forgotten to wind it... That never happened to me while I was in Tirana...

Naturally, there's no reason at all why I should be here as heedful as there.

In the evening I met the messenger Veli. His face

showed that the news he was bringing was not good, and I was so troubled that I forgot to give him my hand.

«What is the news, Veli? Is it something about Bimi?»

«No, Comrade Qemal... (It was long since Veli had addressed me by that name). Bimi is all right, Alert and Skampa had a narrow escape but...» I saw that he grew pale and found it hard to continue. «They have arrested Rexha and they say he is seriously wounded.»

«Rexha? How did it happen, man?»

The messenger told me all he knew about it, but I was so upset that I did not hear the details. Yet I understood that we had lost Rexha.

Two people came to my mind when I heard about Rexha: his sister who is a partisan here and Uncle Jazi who loved him more than his own son. Who knows how they will feel when they hear the news! But I had not thought that it would be even worse for Arta. I met her at headquarters with the commissar Toja and I was surprised to see her in such good health, after all she had suffered by the Gestapo and the gendarmerie. I began by joking telling her that she had needed first the tortures to improve her health, and she replied in the same light manner:

«It is a treatment that costs nothing. The other comrades also can try it; all you need is to be as careless as I was at that time...»

«They are already trying it.» I said and told her about Rexha. At first she thought I was still joking, but when she realized it was true, her face darkened and she stared at me with eyes that were not hers. 'What did you say?' she cried and caught me by the arms. Alive in the hands of the Gestapo? It is worse than death! Ten times worse than death!»

July 14, — A partisan girl crosses my field of vision. She is so small that is almost lost in her new

uniform, but she looks very nice. All her armament is a «Beretta» pistol in its new yellow holster which she carries on her belt and at which she looks proudly every now and then. It is obvious she is a new one. From under her partisan cap, which is the only article of her wardrobe that fits her, are showing two neatly braided plaits.

«Where does she come from?» I ask the messenger Veli who has been my inseparable companion since last night:

«From a village here, nearby. She is the daughter of the peasant who saved my life when I was wounded.»

«Jonuz Bathore?»

«Yes. She is a good girl, brave and devoted to the cause...»

Veli does not look me straight in the eyes; keeps his eyes down and speaks with some difficulty.

«You seem to be sweet on her,» I laugh. «Why don't you get engaged to her? I am sure we will have no objection.»

He does not expect that and looks embarrassed.

«Come on, come on! Rexha has told me all about it.»

He stirs uncomfortably.

«So, Rexha has spoken to you about it,» he mutters and is silent.

July 15. The latest instructions of the Central Committee of the Party on the reorganization of the army are being discussed at the headquarters of the group. New brigades and divisions are to be set up shortly. The Peza group is asked to provide some of the cadres for the new formations and the comrades are at a loss where to find them. They ask me to give them Alert to whom important responsibilities can be entrusted, they want Shtëllunga who miraculously escaped execution, they want Skampa, Bimi and others...

«We need them badly, we can't replace them,»

complains Comrade Toja. "Think it over", I tell him. but he shakes his head unconvinced. "Think it over well. You remember last September in Tirana when they called you to Peza to take over the command of a battalion? Now you are commissar of a whole group. People have got great qualifikes, Toja, and you ought to know it."

Toja smiles, and that is a sign that he is beginning to understand these things properly.

A shortish man wearing good civilian clothes and a hat is walking up and down the yard of the half ruined house in which the comrades are holding their meeting. He may be a Ballist kept under observation. But I don't find it easy to ask him who he is. He is very much out of place among the partisans. Certainly the comrades must have the same impression. I too am wearing a civilian suit and ought to change it as soon as possible. The girls in skirts also seem out of place to me.

The man came to me when he saw me alone. He took off his hat and introduced himself: "Uran Rama, sympathizer of the communists." He complains that he is being neglected.

"Is that so?" I ask. "How do you explain it?"

"I don't know, Comrade... Excuse me... I don't know your name."

"Zenun," I say mockingly, but he believes it.

"Excuse me, Comrade Zenun, but you are a man of the Party and you probably know something about Mr. Backa's negotiations with the Party."

I pretend to be reflecting.

"I am not sure," I say. "Who is Mr. Backa?"

The man seems indignant.

"Bah!" he exclaims. "Is it possible that you don't know who Safet bey Backa is? A patriot, an idealist... A ninety five percent communist? I, a man persecuted by the nazi barbarians came here only on his advice... But I find no satisfactory response, Com-

rade Zenun... let me give you an example. For many days I have been looking for Ismail, Mr. Backa's son-in-law who is a partisan here, and nobody seems to know where he is. They give me all sorts of excuses as if they are suspicious of me. What do you think about that?

I try to placate him but I can hardly keep my face straight.

«Don't worry, Mr. Rama. Here we put everything right in good time and we never fail to uncover the truth. You can be sure of that ... You were working at the Ministry of Education. If I am not mistaken?»

«Yes.»

«You had a subordinate there, a certain Aleko.»

«Yes.»

Every time Mr. Rama says «yes» he winks with, both eyes and his embarrassment increases.

«That it fine. You will soon have the opportunity to meet Aleko. But here he is known by the name of Alert and occupies a position of high responsibility. He will surely be delighted to help you.»

Mr. Rama finds nothing to say. He bows and walks off precipitately.

July 16. I'm leaving today. I have to travel three days and three nights nonstop to reach in time my destination.

I shall have as my companion a prisoner, an enemy of the people whom I never expected to meet, the quisling captain Petrit Kasimati whom the comrades of Peza could not sentence, so they are sending him over to the General Headquarters ... what a coincidence! Can he suspect that I have another score to settle with him? I don't think so... They say he is terribly conceited and may prove a nuisance on the way... Fortunately I have with me two reliable comrades: Ferik Tola who is leaving Peza for good, appointed to a new duty, so important that he will be astonished when he hears about it, and a certain Baxhuli, a simple partisan



from Labëria. Baxhuli is also leaving Peza for good, probably to join his former comrades of the former «Old Detachment». He seems to have a mixed satisfaction: on the one hand he is glad that he will be once more among his old friends with whom he can freely use his native dialect (which he rarely had the occasion to do here), on the other he regrets to leave his new comrades of Peza with whom for six months he has shared the joys and hardships of partisan life. I can see him embracing Comrade Toja with his eyes full of tears while Arta, once so sentimental, is watching them laughing. What a paradoxical.

July 18. Our journey promises to be more difficult than the one I made last January with Veleidin Garxo. The reason is our prisoner, the quisling captain. Last night he became so troublesome that we almost decided to shoot him there and then and face the consequences. Ferik and Baxhuli were ready to do it but I stopped them. I warned him to shut up, as we were passing through a dangerous zone, but he seemed to be doing it on purpose. What did he want? He appeared to have decided to die the death of a «hero», and it certainly would have sounded «heroic» if we had shot him and if his people heard about it.

But «For the crazy, god has created the wise», as Baxhuli put it despite his dislike of the quisling.

July 19. For forty-eight hours we have been travelling at night and resting during the day, hidden from the eyes of the people. None of the three of us knows the way, but thanks to the password and the instructions given to us by Toja at Peza, we have been able to find a base in every village or a boy to show us the way.

Today is the last day of our travel in illegality. We are waiting for the night to fall. We shall have to walk for two more hours before we reach the free zone. Then our troubles with the quisling officer will come to an end, I hope.

The woods where we are hiding is a dense forest of high fir trees which don't let the rays of the sun reach us. We are cold and though very tired, none of us sleeps. Baxhuli is sitting with his back against the trunk of a tree, his head dropping over his automatic. Ferik's eyes are alert and he seems to have many things he would like to discuss with me but has to be aware of the quisling whom we are obliged to keep near us.

We have untied his hands and have allowed him some freedom. He is lying on his back on a thick layer of fallen fir needles staring at the tree tops that are covering us like a green roof. We can hear the whispering sound of the breeze through the branches of the trees and the chirping of various birds, then the song of a lark which seems to silence all the others when it begins to sing.

"How beautiful!" — sighed the officer with his eyes on the green roof.

Ferik and I looked at each other and laughed.

"What are you laughing at?" asked the quisling who had heard us.

"At nothing," said Ferik.

"No, not at nothing," the quisling said angrily and continued: "You will never be able to understand me. How could you? You have no idea about the divine harmony which gives me so much joy."

"You seem to know all the keys of this harmony," I said without hiding the irony of my voice.

"If not all, at least some of them, while you know nothing at all," he replied scornfully.

I only shook my head.

"Shall I give you an example? An example that even these two can understand," he pointed at Ferik and Baxhuli... "In nature, as you can see for yourself, you can find no two things that are completely identical, and yet together they create a perfect harmony which man has never been able to achieve... You

are trying to create harmony from illusions, by levelling the classes. Do you know what will be the final outcome? A tower of Babel where not even the dog will know its master.»

«That is what the bear said,» remarked Barhuli opening his eyes lazily. 'The trees will grow honey because I like it' it said. Ha, ha, ha!»

The quisling scowled and gave me a look in which I read the unspoken question: 'Don't you see how ignorant that partisan is?'

«The partisan is quite right.» I said. «Yes?»

«Of course he is! I am sure you also think like him! That is fine! I thought you had acquired some culture, but I see I was wrong.»

I looked at him with curiosity and was surprised to see that he was speaking with conviction and that it was useless to continue the conversation. But I could not refrain from adding:

«You have a rather high opinion of yourself.»

«What makes you think so?» he asked irritated.

«But you have a very narrow and wrong concept about culture and philosophy in general. You have read a few lines of Plato, two of Kant and two of Spencer and you think you know everything. But these brave men, whom you despise with all your heart, are still bleeding from the oppression of your beloved aristocracy and don't care to have anything to do with that philosophy of yours.»

When he heard me name the three thinkers, the quisling closed his eyes and clenched his jaws. He waited for me to finish, then changed his position and smiled.

«Then you are an intellectual?»

«Why not?»

«A victim of communism?... That is too bad!»

Barhuli could not stop himself from asking:

«Why should you be so sorry, you poor beggar?»

— he asked.

«Because he has two drams of culture,» the quisling said with a twisted smile, «and he could not have anything in common with you who have no idea what culture is.»

Instead of getting angry, as I expected him to do, Baxhuli laughed:

«Is that so? Then, according to you, Lenin, who was the wisest of all of them put together was wrong to make common cause with the workers and the peasants. You are a clever one, indeed...»

Ferik and I burst out laughing. The quisling muttered something under his nose and spoke no more.

July 20. We reached at last the free zone in which no German or Ballist is seen any more. My heart aches at the sight of burned-down villages, of deserted corn fields in which the hordes of the enemy have left only wisps of straw, of old people and children emerging from the caves of the mountains and crawling down the slopes to find their homes ruined, their fruit-trees cut down to the roots, their dogs killed. But on the other hand our hearts filled with joy when we saw the efforts people made to restore life and when we met groups of partisans singing and telling each other various episodes of the last two or three weeks of fighting which make us forget all the rest.

The quisling, disappointed that his dream of a «heroic» death is not yet fulfilled, is dragging his feet unwillingly and does not talk but keeps his eyes down when he hears the stories about the Germans and Ballists.

July 21. Last night we slept like princes on the stacks of aromatic hay in a clearing of the woods. It reminded me of my childhood when we used to wake in the warm July nights on the straw of the freshly harvested crops. The aroma of the mown grass, the murmur of a brook running down the slopes of the forest, the song of a nightingale and the shrill cry of a screech owl which would be protecting its breed from some

dangerous raptile, made me lose myself in memories of the past.

The boom of artillery which came from somewhere near Elbasan and continued for several minutes brought me back to the reality of the present; The quisling had struck his head out of the hay and was listening eagerly. Barxhuli was sleeping. Only Ferik was sitting cross-legged keeping watch with his automatic across his knees.

"Could you offer me a cigarette?" the quisling asked me.

It was the first time he spoke after his exchange of words with Barxhuli. I took the cigarettes out my pocket and held it out to him; then I lighted his cigarette, and he inhaled the smoke deeply. The firing of the big guns started again and I wondered what it could be. I thought of my comrades dispersed among the battalions and brigades of our army and of the difficulties they have to meet in their fight with the enemy. At Peza they told me about Rexha's bad luck and about the narrow escape of Bimi, Alert and Skampa, but about the others not even the messenger Veli knew anything. Who knows what Deko, the Philosopher, Drita and the others are doing now? Who knows when I will be back with them again? Who knows in what condition I will find them?...

The quisling does not intend to let me to my dreams and memories. I see him coming closer and preparing to talk to me.

"Have you ever been in love?" he asks me.

I looked at him astonished. He must be a queer one this man.

"Yes, I have been in love," I said.

"Seriously?"

"Seriously."

"And did she love you in return?"

"Yes."

He shook his head doubtfully and muttered:

«I haven't been so lucky.»

«You may be luckier later,» I said in consolation. He regarded me ironically:

«When later? After you have put a bullet through my head? You should not joke with the dead, mister commissar. It is too cynical, if you know what I mean.»

I decided to listen to all he had to say, hoping to find out something new and more interesting from that strange conversation about the love of the quisling. I told him that he should not abandon all hope since no decision had yet been taken, but that made him more angry.

«I know perfectly well what I can expect, sir... But I can assure you that I don't give a damn. To live or to die, it is all the same to me...»

He continued in that manner for five minutes. He spoke excitedly, nervously, anxious to convince me that he was in earnest, that he was in his right and it was an injustice to bring any accusation against him and that we should have to answer before history for it.

I noticed that Ferik was getting impatient and was ready to shout at me: «Why don't you make him cut out that stuff? Are you going to stand it for ever?» But I smiled at him and he looked aside.

Suddenly the quisling took a sad depressed look and returned to the «confidential» tone with which he had begun his talk about his unlucky love, a talk which concerned me indirectly and which I was anxious to hear to the end.

«It is the only regret I have,» he said clearly after having spoken in a confusion of phrases about a beautiful intelligent girl to whom his parents had engaged him to be married when they were still children. «I loved her with all my heart, from the first day I saw her after fifteen years since we had been engaged... I had all the qualities that a girl like her

could expect to find in her husband, but she refused and I never understood why. Never...

Then he added that her parents were not opposed to the match, that some «personalities» had intervened in his favour, but it had all been in vain. He stopped as if he had no force to continue.

His talk had aroused the curiosity of Ferik now, who a little earlier had been wondering at my patience.

«Hasn't it occurred to you that she might have been in love with somebody else?» I asked him and offered him another cigarette.

«Somebody else...» he sighed. «That is what some of my friends were suggesting. But no, it is impossible!... He snatched the cigarette from my hand, lighted it with nervous movements, pulled at it twice, blew the smoke out to one side so as not to annoy me and said: «No, she has not loved anybody else, I am certain of that.»

«Then she must have disliked you for your views,» I said. «For the black fascist shirt you wore before even coming back to Albania. What else can have made her hate you?

I saw that I had touched a weak point, and it took him some time before replying.

«I don't think so,» he muttered looking aside. «They would have told me if it were so, surely... He paused a little as if he found it difficult to express what he had in his mind. But then he smiled and went on: «If they had mentioned it to me, I would not have hesitated to throw away the black shirt for her sake...»

«To sacrifice your ideal for the sake of your love?» the words escaped from me involuntarily and I laughed.

He raised his head and stared at me with anger.

«This shows that you have never been seriously in love and will never be able to understand the over-

whelming power of love. No, you will never understand me...»

I looked at him with a smile of derision, and that made him pour out a torrent of confused words and thoughts which often had no clear meaning or logical link between them. I got clearly only a phrase which he pronounced more distinctly:

«I can assure you that I have had it in my power, to rape her, to violate her, to have her all to myself so that nobody else but me should enjoy her. But I did not go so far as that. My love for her did not permit it. And I was wrong, do you understand? I was wrong!»

«I understand you,» I clenched my teeth. «In the language of your intelligentsia that also has its name. If I am not mistaken, they call it sadism, you dirty low blackguard!»

I was ready for any reaction on his part. But he only got black in the face, groaned and did not reply.

July 22. This morning we started early, before dawn, and our journey would have been much more agreeable if the quisling had not spoiled it. He proved to be one of those crooked trees which can never be straightened, and Baxhuli complained with regret against Comrade Toja who had not shot him outright like the other one but left him to us to suffer all the trouble he was causing to us. The strange part of it was that the quisling, as if wanting to revenge against Baxhuli whom he hated more than Ferik and me, committed the ugly act which caused us so much inconvenience even after his death.

Was it Baxhuli's fault, or mine, or Ferik's, that the quisling put an end to his life by throwing himself from a rock into a deep precipice from which not even a whole brigade could pull him out? Why did he do it? Was he afraid that after shooting him we would profane his body as his quisling friends had done with the bodies of our comrades by loading them on don-



keys and exploding them about the streets of the town? That is what he must have feared, surely.

At one rate, we were made to sweat while we gave account for the not untimely death of the "hero" of these notes.

July 23. The award I got was quite different from what I expected. Some comrades, even one or two in responsible positions, would not believe that the quisling Petrit Kasimati had committed suicide, and suspected that we, his escort, had arranged it among ourselves out of our hatred for him or to avoid some dangerous complication. They asked me to admit that though Ferik and I were trying to cover up everything, it was Baxhuli and Ferik who had done it, and I did my best to explain how it happened by describing all the details, but all I got was a meaningful wink: "Leave that for those higher up. Tell us the truth."

But perhaps they are only teasing me. I hear the voice of a partisan girl taking my defence: "He isn't that sort, Comrade Zef, no." And it brings some comfort to me. But how much can she help? She is only a girl and nobody listens to her. But I noticed that after her words most of them stopped their exaggerated accusations. Only one of them laughed and turned to the partisan girl.

"You, Comrade commissar, have had an old friendship with Zef in Tirana, that is why you are taking his side."

I stepped back to see who that young woman commissar was who had known me in Tirana. I could not see her well because she was too small and was lost among her comrades. But they seemed to have noticed my purpose and drew aside from her smiling, then I saw the cheerful face which I had known so well sometime ago. She had changed much not only in the way she was dressed but also in her features and I recognized with some difficulty the Vefa of two years ago.

July 26. Today we had a meeting at which the methods of city warfare were discussed and future measures were proposed. The comrade who read the report was well prepared. I did not know him. They told me his pseudonym, and I left it at that, but it was clear that he knew well his subject. Comrade Vefa was present at the meeting and her comment was brilliant. The meeting had been organized for a number of comrades, heads and members of provincial district committees who had been summoned for that purpose and were going to return to their duties after the meeting.

July 27. The meeting continued for the second day and the question of the cadres was discussed. Someone had said that Comrade Taras would come to the meeting and this electrified all of us. But he had unexpectedly been called elsewhere, so that our meeting began in a rather cold atmosphere. But, as the reporter raised one by one various problems which were entirely new to us, our interest was sharpened and we forgot our disappointment. I should have liked Comrade Toja to have been present at that meeting, because he is too rigid on questions regarding the cadres.

July 30. I have been working so hard these two last days that I could find no time to scribble two lines in my diary, though I had plenty of things to write. This means that I must leave aside my diary, particularly as I hear people telling me that from now on, other duties would be assigned to me.

July 30. (Midnight). — Though busy, I feel an irrepressible urge to write in my diary, at least two lines, about what happened to me two hours ago at the square before our headquarters.

They told me that a comrade had come and insisted to see me.

«I can't come, I am too busy.» I said. And indeed I had only an hour to write in my report about some questions regarding the organization of Tirana with

which I had dealt too briefly in my previous report.»

«You must come,» insisted the partisan who had been sent to call me. «That comrade has just arrived from a long journey and is leaving in a quarter of an hour for the north with some partisans who have been released from hospital and are returning to their brigades.»

I looked at him annoyed.

«Why do you hesitate? Come!» repeated the partisan. «That comrade went out of his mind when he heard that you were here. And he says he won't leave without seeing you.»

I gathered up my papers and ran after the partisan. At the square in front of our headquarters I saw a group of comrades gathered around a tall young man wearing a partisan cap with a red star on it.

As soon as he saw me he left the others and ran to me shouting like mad:

«Qemal! My brother!...»

I was embarrassed. Neither his voice nor his face were familiar to me. Only his eyes, ardent and at the same time melancholic, stirred a long forgotten memory in my mind which I was unable to place at the moment.

«Don't you remember me?» he asked opening his arms to embrace me. «Or maybe you still keep your anger from that night when we parted as if we had killed each other's father? We acted like children that time, didn't we?»

It did not take me long to recognize him.

«Eshkan!» I cried and threw my arms round him. But he had changed so much that I could not express all the trust and love I had once had for him.»

«Ah, Qemal, Qemal!» he continued. «How superficially we used to look at things at that time!... This is only the second day I am in Albania after so many years of exile, but these two days were sufficient to show me the enormous struggle and sacrifices that

were needed to put the problems of our cause on a straight road.»

«It needed a head, our cause,» I replied. «It did not need swaggering fools, each pretending to know more than the others and to occupy the first place of leadership.»

Eshkan nodded.

«I understand you,» he said, «and I envy you for having lived here, among your people and under the guidance of the Party, throughout the heroic struggle against fascism. I did not have the same luck. I also have followed the road of struggle against fascism and have suffered its consequences in prisons and concentration camps but I haven't always had the sure guiding compass that you have here. And that has done much harm to me.

Having said that, he stood for a while with his hand on his cheek and a thoughtful look in his eyes. I was watching his face which had taken a hue different from the one I knew five or six years ago, the ashy-green hue of a plant grown in the darkness of the cellar. His hair was also streaked with grey.

«You will regain everything you have lost,» I tried to encourage him. «The war isn't over yet.»

I saw that he was moved and would have liked to prolong the conversation but the time was short.

However, I felt I had to tell him something about Saraga. He had heard about his infamous end and was glad that I had long put an end to my relations with him.

«He was a dangerous man,» he added, «and I was afraid that he might contaminate you through his craftiness, but with you he has failed, and that gives me much joy, I assure you.»

«I have to thank the Party for it, my dear Eshkan,» I said. And I will explain it to you another time. We will no doubt meet again.»

I gave him my hand.

«Wait,» he said gently. «You did not ask me about the old man. Did you know that he is dead?»

«No. Which old man do you mean?»

«Bahri efendi... He was the only old Bolshevik we had at that time... He suffered much, poor man, and he died regretting bitterly that he could not see Albania once more... The guards of the camp killed him last year, only two days before we were freed...»

'So they have killed the poor old man', I was thinking while Eshkan was talking. 'They have killed him... and my thoughts wandered back to the time when I first met him at café «Liria», healthy, cheerful and enthusiastic. 'Upheaval! Upheaval! Can you give me upheaval?' he used to shout at that time, and life proved that he had been right. While Mr. Bardhi, with all his philosophy and erudition, had spent in vain so much effort to oppose revolution.

True, upheaval was not achieved easily, it needed hard fighting and streams of blood to succeed. But it wasn't harder than life under the iron heel of the feudal lords and the fascists.

«... They shot him while he was singing the «International»,» continued Zeshkan. «What an ugly crime!»

'But what a beautiful death for a genuine Bolshevik!' I thought to myself.





## PART SEVEN



## CHAPTER I

### 1

That summer the days followed each other in rapid succession; the events came even faster.

In the beginning of September the First Storm Division, after having foiled the plans of the Germans and the reactionary troops to encircle its forces, succeeded in liberating the whole of Central Albania from the vicinities of Tirana to Peshkopia and Dibra. And now, like an irrepressible mountain torrent, it was rushing towards the north, overwhelming on its way every resistance and offering the people the possibility to set up their own power. In the south, with the exception of the principal towns, all the remaining territory was in the hands of the partisans.

The Anti-fascist committee, the highest executive organ elected at the Congress of Përmet headed by Enver Hoxha, whose name and face were known to everybody and whose pseudonym «Taras» was no longer a secret had undertaken the rehabilitation of the country from the injuries of the past. Schools were

being opened, roads and bridges were being built, telephone communications were being established, damaged and burnt-down houses were being repaired and new partisan brigades and divisions were springing up.

The Germans, confined to the town, and the smaller centres of strategic importance, were only concerned about their own safety from the expected partisan general attack and were building strongly fortified bunkers to dig themselves in.

The armed reactionary bands, badly demoralized, preferred to avoid the Germans and were moving constantly from one place to another, thus adding to the general confusion.

The situation got even worse when a new event occurred, which brought jubilation to the people and panic to the reactionaries. At Kakoma, near Saranda, the partisan forces by strict order by the Commander-in-chief of the National-Liberation Army, Enver Hoxha, pointed their guns against the British troops which were attempting a landing under the pretext of helping the Albanian partisans at a time when the latter had rooted out the Germans from those parts and were advancing towards Vlora and the other towns.

Surprised and uneasy by that unexpected answer which armed Albania gave to the foxy policy of Great Britain, the British units withdrew followed by the curses of the people and to the bitter disappointment of the reactionary leadership which had long been expecting a foreign intervention.

2

«We have lost», were the words that went round from mouth to mouth among the ranks of the quislings and the traitors' organizations. «We have lost!»

These words were openly directed even to the most declared leaders of the reaction who by now could see for themselves which way the wind was blowing; the quislings no longer pulled their guns at the slightest provocation as they were used to do, but slunk away, shook their heads in perplexity and blamed their «boss» for their setback.

Mithat Bey Frashëri, who was well aware which way the accusations were directed, was by no means upset by them. On the contrary, he kept on smiling sarcastically and repeated to everyone who cared to listen: «Now they are in for it», implying that the «rash action of the National-Liberation army at Rakoma was the biggest blunder the communists had ever made.»

That smile and the parsimonious words, which were a clear sign of Mithat Bey's self-conceit, exasperated Afiz Turhani who, after a long absence, decided to pay a visit to the «boss of the 'Balli'» to test his reaction to the latest news and to discuss with him some other matters which appeared to Afiz too complicated. Afiz Turhani had often had the opportunity to talk wits to the «bey of Frashery» and knew his haughty manner, but after the plight in which the «Balli's» affairs had fallen he expected to find the bey a bit less stuck up. When he saw that the bey had not only remained his old self but was putting on a new air of self-satisfaction, Afiz began to stroke his beard and said:

--The almighty has blessed you with many excellent qualities, Mithat Bey, but if you allow me to speak frankly, he has omitted to give you something which you badly need for your policy with the communists. You don't seem to realize how determined they are.

Again the sarcastic smile appeared in the corners of Mithat bey's mouth, but he raised his eyebrows and the deep lines on his forehead showed that the

shaft had hit the target. He took his silk handkerchief from his pocket, passed it over his lips, then over his forehead as if searching for the right words, but he was going through these gestures only to sooth his irritated nerves.

«I also shall speak frankly to you, Afiz efendi.» he said at last having returned his handkerchief to the side pocket of his jacket. «I am somewhat handicapped by my stammer, but for that we can only blame our creator. As for the rest, you are quite wrong, my dear, particularly in regard to my policy with the communists... In 1925, while you were enjoying your billiards in the cafés of Italy, I was raising my voice in warning against the self-complacency of the followers of Zog, telling them that the time of oriental rule in Albania, at the gates of Europe, had passed, that agrarian and other democratic reforms were urgently needed to placate the people if we all did not want to find ourselves in a very unexpected and serious unpleasant situation. But how could one hope to fill the heads of these ignoramuses? They were unable to understand why the red revolution had triumphed only in the Russia of the muzhiks, why it had failed ignominiously in Germany and Hungary, while in England and France it never started at all... They could not understand it and they continued in the old way... So nothing could prevent what happened to our country with such a mass of ignorant people. Was I wrong at Peza in 1942 when I used all my authority to prevent the union between the nationalists and the communists? No, my dear friend. It was the only policy we could pursue. If we had acted otherwise, we would have lost our independence and would have been unable to tear the mask off the Communist Party which had already won the hearts of the people, and all the hatred that the people had for Zog and his followers would have been turned against us. But Abaz Kupi would not listen to me at that time and that was

understandable, because, — let us say it *entre nous*, — he was a simple henchman of Zog.»

«Yes, that's true» murmured Afiz Turhani who had no love for either Zog or Abaz Kupi. Now he had the impression that Mithat bey was being fairly reasonable. He even wanted to apologize for the harsh words he had used at the beginning of their talk, but Mithat bey raised his hand to indicate that he had not yet finished...

«That is how things stand, my honoured friend, whereas you persist with your everlasting chanting that 'Mithat Bey does not know the communists. Mithat Bey's policy with the communists is wrong, and go on repeating, it right and left... Not only that, but you are wagging too freely your tongue about other matters regarding the 'Balli' and Mithat Bey. And I will tell you as frankly as you did a moment ago that I have long suspected you. Nevertheless I have preferred to trust your turban rather than your person...»

Afiz Turhani changed his position in his seat unable to control his nerves.

«My turban? You trust my turban more than me? I don't get it.»

«You don't understand me? I believe it. But that shows that is it not Mithat Bey but you who don't know the communists. Have you ever listened to the words of the «International» hymn when they sing it? One of the lines goes like this: No god or king shall save us... It means that god is their number one enemy, then comes the king... In other words, first they will do away with Afiz Turhani, then with Mithat bey... But you have never dared to look on that side of the question and have never wanted to understand that whatever service you may render to the reds, that turban of yours will be the first to go to the scaffold... Yes, your eminence, that turban of yours.»

Mithat Bey had taken the pose of a judge pointing

an accusing finger at the defendant. Annoyed by that attitude, Afiz rose to his feet, rolled angrily his eyes and began to talk making an effort to control his temper:

«My consideration for your erudition is great, Mithat Bey, but my patience has its limits too. I am not aware of having betrayed either my turban or my patriotism. Tell me precisely where I have been wrong and I will try to answer you.»

«Where precisely you have been wrong? It is hard to find where you have been right.» Moving up and down his eyebrows, Mithat Bey mentioned several occasions on which Afiz had used his «unbridled and disgustingly gross» speech which was meant to discredit the «Balli» and Mithat Bey himself and to help the communist propaganda.

«Those are trifles, Mithat Bey. Arguments like these cannot convince me,» said Afiz Turhani having regained some of his composure. «And you know perfectly well why I use these expressions.»

«Trifles!? Do you call trifles the role you played at that meeting of the social democrats some four months ago at the house of the Velos?»

«I still don't understand you,» said Afiz frowning.

«Of course you don't. Wasn't it you who gave the tone to that ill-fated meeting? You pretended to be painting the eyebrows of the social democrats but you just plucked out their eyes. You took the side of the National-Liberation movement and put the social democrats before the dilemma to «gulp it or spit it». You can't deny either that you had a finger in the tragic end of that priceless man and our right hand, the lawyer Meçe, whose loss left the social democrats suspended in midair and uncertain which way to look for guidance... But the day will come, your eminence, the day will come. »

«When I will be asked to render account for my crimes?» Afiz interrupted him. «Was that what you

intended to say? Thank you! I have considered you a man of learning, a wise and reasonable man, but now I see how superficial you are. Or perhaps you deliberately want to attribute to me the exploits of that blundering fool Hajdar Bey? In that case let me tell you that you are quite mistaken. They call me Afiz Turhani and nobody can play such tricks on me.»

Mithat Bey had abandoned by now his magisterial pose and, holding his hand over his chin and, with the grimace of a man swallowing a bitter medicine, his head bent to one side, was listening with a show of controlled indignation to the Afiz's outburst.

Having said that, Afiz Turhani wiped his face with his big handkerchief, threw his cloak over his shoulders and prepared to leave. But then, realising that he had not said everything he had wanted to say, Afiz paused and turned again to the bey who had not changed his position:

«As for having a finger in the late Mr. Meçe's death, that also is a futile attempt on your part to cover up the true culprit. But I swear that I will make those responsible for his death speak out with their own mouths... And that, pretty soon! I hope you see what I mean.»

Only now Mithat Bey came out of his immobility, turning his frightened eyes to Afiz, and, joining his hands in a gesture of prayer, he cried pleadingly:

«Please, Afiz efendi, I am sorry, I am terribly sorry!»

### 3

«Now they are in for it.» It was a phrase on which Mithat Bey had not stumbled by accident or in a

state of irritation. On the contrary he had carefully calculated the effect it could produce and had said it with a deliberate purpose. In his opinion, the act of the partisans at Kakoma was «real madness». First of all they had disregarded the famous Anglo-Soviet-American alliance with which the Communist Party for the last two years annoyed beyond measure the Italians, the Germans and their collaborators. Now his predictions that the alliance, with which the communists had been misleading had succeeded in turning the head of the people, was nothing but a castle built on sand, was at last coming true. Secondly, and that was linked directly with the fate of Albanian nationalism, Mr. Churchill, after what had happened before, even if he had never had in mind to land British troops in Albania, now he would find himself obliged to do it. «The English may well be as cold-blooded as you like, but they can't be expected to stand being kicked about by a crowd of ignorant peasants. It is inconceivable that the ragged beggars of a country which has been oppressed for centuries and is so small that you could hardly pick it out on the map, should have the nerve to point their guns at the fleet of Great Britain which had come to their aid. No, no! That must not be allowed to go unanswered. It was our good luck that the eyes of the communists were blind to the consequences of their act and it is to the advantage of the just cause of nationalism. Now we can wait and see what will happen.»

And they waited, indeed for hours, days and weeks, particularly Emira who, after her «inspiring» talk with Mithat Bey at the house of Mr. Backa had been trying hard to link together the broken threads of the social-democrats. One of the genial ideas of the «head of Albanian nationalism» in his talk with the girl had been to proclaim the late lawyer Meçe a «Hero of Albanian social democracy» fallen bravely in the struggle against the German occupation. But for the time



being it was necessary to keep it out of the press. The girl had achieved appreciable results in her new undertaking and now that the landing of British troops was a matter of days, if not of hours, she had prepared an article which, in imitation of those of the Albanian Communist Party, had signed «The Albanian social-democratic party». She was keeping it in her drawer ready to be printed and distributed as soon as the British troops landed on Albanian soil.

Ajet, who found the article by accident, read it with satisfaction, but raised an important objection:

«You must omit the phrase: 'Our social-democrat victims, fallen heroically a year ago at the legendary battle of Grehat against the detested Italian occupiers'.»

«I don't see why I should omit it,» she said. «At Grehat we gave our first victim, the late Levenica, who was well known for his social democratic ideas.»

«Leave it out, listen to me,» her brother insisted. «If you don't, you risk a conflict with Mithat Bey who has always sustained that those who died in Grehot were heroes of the Balli Kombëtar». Then you will give the communists cause to laugh at us as they laughed last year at Mithat Bey and the «Balli». You remember?...»

The girl was persuaded. In fact, the killing of a few Ballists at Grehot at the time of Italy's capitulation had been an affair of which nobody could be proud of, though «Balli» had seized the occasion to proclaim it an act of heroism in the struggle against the Italian fascists, which was supposed to prove that they too had fought against the fascists, but the truth came out clearly and none of them dared by now mention it any more. That event had made the Ballists ridiculous in the eyes of the people and was given as an example of falling victim to one's own stupidity.

Satisfied by his success in convincing his sister, Ajet returned to the subject of Kakoma. He had heard from

a reliable source that Mithat Bey's interpretation of the incident was accepted by some of the most influential personalities of the country. Mithat Bey himself was annoyed by the lack of patience of those who expected the British landing. Ajeta shared the bey's opinion that the «rash act» of the partisans at Kakoma had been a big blunder.

4

The slogan the «partisan blunder» spread so widely among the reactionary circles that even Afiz Turhani refrained for the time being from putting into effect his threat against the «boss of the Ballists». Two days later he met Hajdar Kasimati at Café Kursal and, instead of pouring out his bitterness at Mithat Bey, he sat down and suffered the excited Hajdar Bey to tell him that he had seen in a dream «a fleet of 120 English warships armed with 120 guns each and a swarm of planes carrying five ton bombs.»

«My dreams always come true, Afiz efendi, I assure you,» Hajdar Bey said laughing with tears of joy in his eyes.»

His joy had made him forget the quarrel with Afiz Turhani at the house of the Velos and he was chattering away as if nothing had ever happened.

«What day is it today?» he asked and looked at his watch as if it were a calendar and, without waiting for the answer, continued:

«Sunday! No, today they can't come. The English don't do anything on their Sabbath. They won't repeat the madness of the Italians who landed on Good Friday in 1938. But tomorrow you are sure to have them in Durrës. You can take my word for it...»

He laughed with his sibilant «Hee, hee, hee» which grated on Afiz's nerves. «He is overdoing it» thought Afiz to himself and found an effective way of checking the bey's enthusiasm:

«I have an apprehension, Hajdar Bey.» he said gravely

«What apprehension?»

«I fear that the English may bring with them that 'reprobate', and that would spoil the whole thing.»

«Raprobate?» Hajdar Bey's voice lost its sonority and he began to bite his thumb as he always did when he was taken unawares. «Do you mean that you give credit to what Abaz Kupi wrote in his paper about Zog's talk with Churchill?»

«Yes, and it can be serious. The news item said: 'They exchanged views on a number of questions regarding the future of Albania.' I read it with my own eyes.»

For a minute Hajdar Bey stood silent, biting his thumb and staring at a cloud of dust raised by a German lorry.

«That did the trick.» Afiz Turhani said to himself satisfied at the effect he had obtained.

«What does Mithat Bey say about it?» Hajdar Bey's voice had become subdued.»

«Mithat Bey has not experienced on his own back the lashes of Zog as you and I have done, Hajdar Bey, that is why he is not worrying on that account.

The answer did not please Mr. Kasimati but he did not react immediately. In fact, whenever the question of a reconciliation with Zog was brought up, Hajdar Bey was ready to quarrel even with Mithat Frashëri. The recent rapprochement between Abaz Kupi and the «Balli Kombëtar» had irritated him badly, but Mithat Bey had explained the matter in such a way that Mr. Kasimati's fears of having the «reprobate» back on Skënderbey's throne were allowed to some extent.

But here was Afiz Turhani who hated Zog as badly as Hajdar Bey himself did (that was the strongest tie between the two men) and had expressed his doubts on that point, and those doubts were not based on simple conjecture but on reliable documents. That was how Mr. Kasimati was reasoning about this problem now.

«Did you read yourself that news published in the 'Fatherland', Afiz efendi?» he asked anxiously.

«Yes, with my own eyes, I swear by Muhamed Mustafa,» replied Afiz pointing at his eyes.

They got up and walked for a while in silence along the «Durrës» street. The dust raised by the lorry had been blown away. Afiz Turhani noticed a brown stain on Hajdar Bey's black jacket and laughed.

«Why are you laughing? This is not a laughing matter,» said Hajdar Bey who was still thinking about the «reprobate».

«No, no. I was not laughing about that...» Afiz stood for a moment as if reflecting, then raised his hand to his forehead as if struck by a new idea, while Hajdar Bey stared hopefully at him. «Now I understand why the partisans reacted as they did to the English landing at Kakoma, which Mithat Bey considers a blunder on their part.»

«I don't understand.»

«It is quite clear: they must have seen his majesty among the landing troops and... Well, you know how they reacted... They must have told the English about the decision of the Congress of Përmet which forbids Zog to come to Albania. At first the English must have pretended not to understand, but then the guns must have persuaded them...»

«The bastards?» laughed Hajdar Bey and wanted to add something more, perhaps something good about the communists, but his eyes caught the dainty figure of Emira Velo coming towards them carrying a small bundle under her arm.

«What is that the young lady is going to tell me? Let's hope it will be something good.» thought both the old men to themselves hopefully.

They shook hands with her. Afiz Turhani was afraid that she would refuse to take his hand, because she could not have forgotten their quarrel in the presence of her brother and Mr. Meçe. Not only that, but she might have heard Mithat Bey's insinuations about Afiz's role in the latest setbacks of the social democrats and in the lawer Meçe's death, which would give her ample cause to hate him. Instead, the girl took first Afiz's hand and gave him such a charming smile that Hajdar Bey felt somewhat jealous.

«Have you heard the latest news? Surely...» she said giving them no chance to pay her the usual interminable compliments.

«Yes, certainly,» replied in one voice the two old men as they placed her between them and turned back to walk with her in the direction where she was going.»

«But there is a snag in that landing, I'm afraid,» said Afiz.

«Why do you think so?»

He repeated his doubts as he had explained them to Mr. Kasimati.

«On what do you base your conclusions?» the girl asked.

«On a news item printed in the «Fatherland» some-time ago if you remember. There must be something in that meeting of Churchill with the 'reprobate'.»

«Nonsense!» laughed the girl. «Didn't you know that there was nothing true in it?»

Hajdar Bey needed nothing more to open his arms and embrace her. She lowered her eyes embarrassed and drew a step aside when she saw that the bey raised his hands as for a prayer.

«An angel sent from heaven to heal the sores of the sinners of this world!» he cried.

Afiz was looking silently at the girl and his look implied that she should «pay no attention to that old fool, give some explanations if she had any».

«I have read a strong rejection of that news in a communist tract some time ago,» she went on. «It was quoting a declaration made by the English themselves. It was reproducing in English the text of a cable received by an English liaison officer from Cairo. I remember that his name was Tilman, Major Tilman, and the text, as far as I can remember, was something like this: 'The rumours about an alleged meeting between Mr. Churchill and Zog is groundless. Churchill has never spoken with Zog and has no intention of doing so.' The tract was followed by a strong comment of the communists which was burring alive the «Legality».

«The bastards» laughed Hajdar Bey again. «They are real masters in these things. Eh, if we could only bring them over to our side!...»

They walked in silence for a while, then Emira bent her head towards Afiz Turhani and whispered:

«I am sorry that I quarrelled with you that day, Afiz efendi. Later I thought it over and decided that it was wrong on my part. Mithat Bey also has spoken to me about you lately and in very complimentary terms. So, from now on we are friends, aren't we?»

Afiz pressed her hand in sign of complete agreement and whispered back, an enthusiastic. «Of course we are!»

She continued her conversation with him in a low voice leaving out of it Mr. Kasimati, who, although straining his ears to the utmost, could hear nothing.

«You will give a helping hand now to the social democracy, if not for anything else, at last for the sake of Mr. Meçe who fell victim of those who disliked

him but who has always had a high consideration for you.

«With all my heart, with all my heart!» cried Afiz so loudly that Hajdar Bey was startled.

## 5

Something unusual was happening at the back entrance of the town hall. The three stopped under an acacia tree by the garden of Café Kursal. The customers of the café had also got to their feet and were watching. A gendarmerie corporal, his cap pushed back almost over his neck, his jacket unbuttoned, was shouting at a group of ten or fifteen people whom he had rounded up on the sidewalk. He had pulled out his German automatic pistol and was threatening them with it.

«You rabble. You good for nothing scoundrels! Did you think you could do that to me and get away with it? To me, to Corporal Brahja? Either you tell me who stuck that tract on the wall or I have this for you, for all of you!»

He was shouting all the time, brandishing his pistol and turning from time to time to complain to another gendarme who was standing behind him.

«Right here, under my eyes! The villains!»

Emira was no longer listening to the jabberings of Hajdar Bey about his patriotic merits or to the more elaborate phrases of Afiz Turhani about the affairs of the social democrats. Her eyes had caught in passing the first words of the tract stuck on the wall of the town hall and could not take her mind off the words printed in big black letters:

«To the gendarmes of the quisling government! To

the men deceived by the 'Balli' and the 'Legality'! ... The dawn of freedom is approaching! ... The National Liberation Army is at the gates of the capital! ... Abandon the ranks of the enemy before it is too late! ...»

«That is enough to drive one crazy,» she was thinking. «Now the communists have a real army and are speaking from new positions; from the positions of people sure of their victory. And it is strange how they can work and fight inside the city, under the nose of the Germans, and nobody can catch them or even see them... Where do they stay? Where do they hide?» She was reminded of Qemal Orhanaj and thought that she would never see him again. And Demko? He also has disappeared. Perhaps they have made him a commissar or something, and he no longer cares to maintain his relations with his old friends... Who knows to what position Qemal has risen?» she sighed. «The dawn of freedom is approaching! ... The men of the 'Balli' and the 'Legality' are abandoning the sinking ship...»

'They have incredible faith in their force... Why shouldn't they, after all? They had it when they were only a handful and had no reasonable hope of success, so why shouldn't they have it now?....'

For a moment she felt like a branch of a tree in autumn, when the north wind shakes down its last day leaves. «What hope can I have of reviving the social-democracy? The English? Can they be stronger than the Germans who are failing so disgracefully in their fight against the communists?»

«By working with the youth...» she heard Afiz Turhani who was continuing his discourse despite her obstinate silence.

She turned to him her eyes full of despair.

«The youth? Where do you see them, Afiz efendi?»

Afiz's reply was drowned by some shots coming from the square of the ministries.



«Let us get out of here,» said Hajdar Bey who did not care to know what was going on. Some more shots were heard, this time from Mussolini Boulevard.

People were running in all directions for cover. The street patrols were moving in cautiously. Within a few minutes a number of army lorries arrived with regular German troops, gendarmes and mercenaries. An armoured car appeared rumbling from behind the town clock and entered «28 November» Street. Hajdar Bey rushed into the hall of the café where a group of customers had gathered leaving their coats, hats and umbrellas on the chairs and tables of the garden where they had been sitting.

Afiz Turhani followed after Hajdar Bey but could not enter because someone had locked the door from inside, so they remained on the veranda standing with their backs against the wall and raising their eyes from time to time to see what was going on.

Among the crowd running down Mussolini Boulevard Emira saw a young man on a bicycle riding at full speed so that his stripped shirt bulged like a big bubble on his back. She recognized Deko, she followed him with her eyes as far as the corner of the gymnasium, where the boy stopped for a moment, snatched a packet from the hands of a woman dressed in a «çarçaf» and was off again...

When she looked the other way again, the Germans and other armed men were no longer in their former place. The Germans were climbing on their lorries while the gendarmes and mercenaries were running along the streets from the bank and the parliament building and up to the ministries tearing off the tracts that had been stuck on walls and telephone poles on which she could still read the words printed in big black letters:

«Gendarmes of the quisling government! Men deceived by the 'Balli' and the 'Legality'! The dawn of freedom is approaching!»

## CHAPTER II

### I

At last Ismail had found a way of communicating directly with Mr. Backa. In his latest letter he was writing: «The partisan forces at Peza have been reorganized in new formations, and now I am sure to be chosen a member of the political section of my brigade. That will give me the opportunity to change the situation whenever I like, but I shall have to be very careful.»

«Unfortunately» he complained, «you can't realize how hard it is to work underhand with the communists. On recommendation, they have sent to me a certain Uran Rama whom everybody knows as a faithful servant of the quislings, and they say that Mr. Backa could do better than send us such a man. Besides, he does not seem very clever and could make some blunder dangerous to both you and me... I have tried to avoid him, you can understand why, but he interprets my attitude as a plot against him and talks too much against the comrades of the command. It would be very kind of you if you clear out all these matters with the partisan command.»

After some other suggestions, Ismail ended his letter with «my love and a thousand kisses to Miss Edda».

«That is my true Ismail.» said Mr. Backa to himself with satisfaction. But he was still not at ease. Of his son-in-law's various proposals and suggestions, the one about a meeting outside Tirana, on which the partisan command was insisting, gave him a feeling of uneasiness. Not only the command, but Ismail himself insisted that Mr. Backa should accept it.

«What the devil do they want that meeting for?» he asked himself and then added: «Such a meeting was indispensable when I was offered the post of the prime minister... But now that is off, and my meeting with the communists can serve no purpose. I refused the post, and that is that,» sighed Mr. Backa.

He remembered the peasant from Mallakastra whom he had received in that same room last summer and began pacing up and down the room with a «Camel» cigarette in the corner of his mouth which he had not yet lighted. Though alone in the room and nobody could hear him, he repeated that he had «refused the post of the prime minister» in a louder voice as if to persuade himself that it was so, instead of saying, «I wanted it but they did not give it to me». The truth was that someone from the Kommandature or the regency had suggested him and neither Mithat Bey nor Abaz Kupa had opposed it. But just when the matter was about to be decided, Major Ficht had spoiled the whole thing by pretending that «his dear friend» should not be overburdened because it was bad for his health. Funny! Why should he interfere? Not only that, but the major had proposed to General Fichtun that Mr. Backa could be offered another merited post, something which placed him close to the prime minister, but not the very post of the prime minister, no, by no means! And the proposal of Major Ficht was a proposal only in words; which in fact was a decree, an outright order!

So Mr. Backa had seen himself obliged to accept the subordinate post they had offered him and that had embittered him. Firstly, because he would not know what to say to the friends who had publicly congratulated him in advance for his post of the prime minister, secondly, because his daughter insisted repeating that Major Ficht had played a «dirty trick» on him and that the Germans should either reverse

their decision or he should say «aufwiedersehen» to them, take his darling Edda with him and join Ismail in the mountains. But that was a decision which Mr. Backa could not take so easily. He was too deeply involved in the major's network and could not pull out before the major and all his empire were driven out of the country. Oh how ardently Mr. Backa wished this could happen as soon as possible but without uncovering any of the details of his collaboration with the Germans! Else who knew what unexpected complications might arise! Mr. Backa had in mind all sorts of dangers: the Germans might not be able to take with them all the secret acts of their archives, and some compromising documents might fall into the hands of the communists; or Major Ficht himself may be taken prisoner and, to save his life or simply out of spite, could reveal all he knew about the Albanians he had in his service. Safet Bey under the orders of a simple major! That would be sensational, indeed! Then there was his participation in the investigation and the execution of that communist with the queer name of Shtëllunga; yes, why did he get involved in it? His part in it could not be pardoned no matter what services he rendered to the National Liberation movement. Mr. Backa had not been forced to it by Major Ficht but had acted on his own initiative, to cover up once and for all the ties that that young man had with his son-in-law Ismail. And he had insisted that Shtëllunga should be executed at once, in his presence, so badly had he been frightened by the steady loathing look the communist had given him without pronouncing a word but only shaking his head under the tortures denying everything...? And what about Ismail, whom you had a member of your cell, do you deny having known him?» had asked Mr. Backa exasperated by the young man's silent denials. Shtëllunga had attempted to get to his feet but had only succeeded in raising his head and giving him that

terrible look; then he had spat a bloody spittle at his face.

Mr. Backa had pulled out his revolver in order to shoot the boy there and then.

«Nein, nein!» had cried the major. «We haven't done with the comrade yet... But you can put your mind in peace, Mr. Backa, it will be quite all right...» He had pointed at his watch and had indicated to his friend that the execution would be carried out in another way by half past three in the morning. Safet Bey had not been present at the execution but he had no doubt that it had been carried out. He counted it among the things «done and forgotten». Other things which had occurred more recently were worrying Mr. Backa now. He had sound reasons to believe that the partisans did not approve of his accepting the new important post of the prime minister though he thought in that case Ismail would have mentioned it in his letter...

As regarded the landing of the British, Mr. Backa fully agreed with Mithat Bey that Churchill could not remain indifferent to the humiliation suffered by his fleet at the hands of the partisans. But that landing would come at a very inappropriate time as far as Mr. Backa was concerned. The landing of British troops in Albania had been expected for more than two years, and Mr. Backa had seriously been pondering over its possible consequences and had wisely kept out of politics during the Italian and the first period of the German occupation (it was fortunate for him that they had omitted to include his name in the list of deputies to the Chamber of fascist corporations in 1939 because of a malicious trick played on him by the prime minister Shefqet Verlaci). But he had committed the grave error of getting himself involved now, just when the English were expected to come. These damned, English! Couldn't they do it two or three months earlier, but had to wait until he got

himself mixed up in that German mess and, if called upon to give account of himself, could hardly expect to be believed if he declared that he had not collaborated. However, the English would not consider it a crime punishable by death. Had it been so, Hitler would not have given his consent to the British landing in Albania. «It is that business with the partisans that keeps me awake all night. But I hope it can be arranged. My future son-in-law, who will soon become a member of the political section of his brigade, will see to it. But I shall have to be extremely careful...»

He lighted his cigarette and sat down to write.

## 2

Two days later a black four-seats «Millecente» Fiat car drove noiselessly through the drizzling rain and pulled up in front of Mr. Backa's house. An officer of the gendarmerie, very elegant in his new uniform, came out of it first. He was followed by a civilian, also very well dressed in a dark grey suit, a silk shirt and a cherry-coloured necktie that matched to perfection with the suit.

A minute later, from the front seat came out a guard who appeared too impertinent to Mr. Backa's man servant with his black moustache cut short «after the fashion» and with his swaggering manner. Mr. Backa's servant, an old man, was shocked to see him chatting with the driver instead of running to open the door of the car for him better. He ran to open it himself but the gentlemen were already out of the car and he could only bow to them obsequiously and invi-

te them to follow him into the house. They passed the door guarded by two sentries and walked towards Mr. Backa who was waiting for them standing on the veranda in his pyjamas.

Mr. Backa did not hear distinctly the names announced by the servant but he heard that they were «Mr. Ismail's friends» and invited them to follow the servant to the guest room while he went upstairs to dress.

Having shown the guests in the smaller guest room in the ground floor, the servant went out again, curious to see the guard who had struck him as unduly impertinent. The man had left the car and was talking to the two sentries and making them laugh with his stories about his encounter with some partisans of the First Division at a village near Tirana. The servant also laughed when the guard said that ever since that day he had got so used to the word «comrade» that he often addressed his superiors with it.

The driver had turned the car in the direction from where it had come and was also smiling at the guard's story. He was leaning with his elbow on the driving wheel and was glancing from time to time up and down the street. His face seemed tired but he was a very handsome young man with his reddish hair showing under his military cap which he wore tilted over an eye. He was wearing a brown shirt like those of the officers, with two big breast pockets. Mr. Backa's servant had the impression that he had seen that face before but could not remember on what occasion and murmured to himself: «You are getting old, Braho, old boy.»

He would have liked to stay a little longer to listen to the amusing stories of the guard, but he remembered that Miss Eda was not at home and he might be needed in the house.

He saw Mr. Backa going into the guest room; Mr.

Backa told him to stay by the door and to let nobody in without announcing him.

«Not even Major Ficht?» asked the servant.

«Major Ficht yes. He can come right in if he comes.» But then Mr. Backa paused a little and changed his mind.

«No, no. If the major comes show him in the big room and then come here to tell me.»

Then he went into the room with many doubts crossing his mind. «What friends of Ismail can these be? Are they real partisans or has Ismail recently persuaded them to follow his example? Could there be some trickery in this thing?...

The guests, who were sitting next to each other on the deep couch upholstered with green velvet, got to their feet when Mr. Backa came in. His suspicions increased when he saw that they looked like real government functionaries. The letter he had sent the other day to Peza containing his recommendation of Uran Rama was extremely compromising. Could it have fallen into the hands of the authorities, and these two guests were men of the secret police sent on a preliminary investigation?

He gave his hand first to the officer, then to the civilian, and waited for them to introduce themselves, but as they were not doing it, he saw himself obliged to ask them who they were.

«I am sorry, I don't know to whom I have the honour to...»

«It is our fault that we did not introduce ourselves,» smiled the officer. «We are coming from the First Army Corps with a special recommendation by Comrade 'Kryqi'. They have sent us to you on an important mission.»

«'Kryqi'?!» Mr. Backa was terrified. None but Major Ficht knew that pseudonym of Ismail. 'Are my guests agents of the Gestapo or is that idiot Ismail



using the same pseudonym with his partisan comrades?"

He made an effort to dissimulate his trouble but it was difficult. His face had grown pale and his eyes were shifty when he began to talk with feigned nonchalance.

"The Army Corps? An important mission?... I don't see..."

He stood for a moment holding his chin with his hand, then turned again to the officer:

"Couldn't you tell me who you are, personally, I mean?"

"We are nameless," the officer replied still smiling. "But if you insist I can tell you that my pseudonym is 'Topçe' and my friend here is Deko."

"What is the meaning of that?" Mr. Backa was getting angry. "I don't allow such things to happen in my house, no, by no means." And he began to fumble for the cigarettes which he had forgotten upstairs. Topçe offered him his packet, lighted his cigarette and tried to calm him down:

"Please, don't get upset; we have brought with us the man who has spoken with you sometime ago about that matter with Ismail." He motioned to Deko with his head and Deko went out. "You will be convinced when you see him."

"I still don't understand anything," said Mr. Backa pulling nervously at his cigarette.

Deko came back with the driver of the car. The driver came in holding his cap in his hand, saluted by joining his heels and smiled to Mr. Backa.

After a moment of silence, during which Mr. Backa was staring through his glasses at the driver's face, he turned to Topçe shaking his head:

"This is a joke lieutenant." A senseless joke and an insult to me. I have never seen that man in my life."

"Yes you have, bey, you have seen me before,"

said the driver clearly and smiled showing a perfect row of white teeth.

Mr. Backa craned his neck a little and put his hand over his ear to hear better that voice which sounded familiar to him. His expression was that of a horse which pricks its ears when it smells danger.

«Don't you remember me?» continued the driver still smiling. «We exchanged some profound thoughts together that time... They were about the maize bread and its effect on the people. You offered me a cigarette which I refused because it was foreign...»

Mr. Backa crossed his arms over his chest and took a deep breath. «This is strange, by god!» he muttered. The suspicion that that young man, who had come to him sometime before dressed as a poor peasant, was an agent provocateur was getting stronger.

«... You asked me about Ismail whom I did not know at that time,» continued the messenger Veli. «But now I know him and he gave me a letter for you when we parted last night.»

Looking at the folded paper which the messenger handed to him, and recognizing Ismail's handwriting from the first words: «Death to fascism» and «Dear Father Safet Bey», Mr. Backa sighed with relief and began to talk freely:

«So, you are that Mallakastra peasant who came here dressed like one from the Tirana villages? Well, well, I am really surprised. But I had my suspicions that time... Anyhow...» He turned to Topçe, who was offering him a second cigarette, and went on: «What is the important mission on which you were sent to me? It was from the First Army Corps, you said... Yes... From the First Army Corps... I have read in one of your tracts about its latest exploits and they impressed me... They impressed me immensely... Though to tell the truth they made me apprehensive at the same time... I still hold my views that the Germans

can react violently if we provoke them too much, that a big building...

'Is most dangerous when falling down' Topçe completed his thought seeing that Mr. Backa could continue interminably at that rate. «That is why we must abandon it before it begins to topple down.»

Mr. Backa was taken aback.

«Was that intended for me? I think you are wrong. I am an old man, as you can see for yourself. Of what use could I be if I came with you?»

«Well, we are not asking you to come to the mountains, Mr. Backa. But you could help us very much staying here in Tirana. We know your patriotic feelings and value them highly...»

«God knows them, too» said Mr. Backa flattered.

«Yes, god knows them, but it is more important that the people should know them too... We partisans don't go beating about the bush, so I will go straight to the matter that has brought us to you.»

«Please I am at your disposal.»

Mr. Backa, whose face had now taken his normal self-confident expression, drew an armchair close to them and sat down. Topçe and Deko resumed their seats, too.

The messenger Veli, who had remained standing, gave an inquiring look at Topçe, took his approval, saluted and went out quietly.

«For the moment we are going to ask you to do only two things for us.» said Topçe handing to Mr. Backa two photos which he took out from a small pocket inside his boot. «First, you must procure special documents like those issued by the German Kommandature to their most trusted agents for the two men on these photos. We leave their names and identity characteristics to your choice... Secondly,» Topçe pretendend not to be aware of Mr. Backa's impatience, «you must put your car and your driver at the dispo-

sal of these two comrades whenever they may need it...

«The bodyguard, too,» said Deko.

Mr. Backa was looking at Topçe as a defendant expecting to hear the sentence of the court. For two minutes he said nothing and only his fingers drummed nervously on the arms of his chair.

«Do you find these matters dangerous?» asked Topçe.

«They are very dangerous,» said Mr. Backa bitterly. «I am risking my head if I am found out.»

«Not you. The two men who will use the false documents will lose their lives if they are found out. As for you, if anything goes wrong with them, you shall be notified in time to take the necessary measures.» At this point he looked at his watch. «We can't stay any longer. You know how to go about it and you need no further instructions. Tomorrow we will come again or we will send somebody else with the password «Ismail's friend».

It was useless to refuse. That young man was so determined in manner and words that one could find no argument to counter him. Mr. Backa listened in silence and nodded his agreement to everything the young man said though half-heartedly. At last he agreed to do everything he was requested. «I will do all I can» he replied.

He put the photos in his pocket and saw his guests out as far as the street door. There he stopped to smile to the driver who was waving his hand to him, but suddenly he was so much struck by the figure of the impertinent guard that he could not utter a word. When he returned into the room, with his trembling hands he took out the two photos from his pocket and examined them closely. When he saw the second photo he struck his forehead with his open hand and exclaimed: «This is impossible? He was supposed to be dead, executed! Oh God, oh, almighty

God! Preserve us and keep us from losing our sanity of mind!»

A chill run through his spine, his knees weakened and he let himself sing in his armchair holding in his hand the photo of Shtëllunga.

### CHAPTER III

#### I

The bulletin of the «People's Voice» which came out at that day with its internal and external news, carried on its front page the appeal «Throw down your arms!» and was different from the previous numbers. Deko said that it was «like the bulletins of Zef's time» and thought that it should be distributed more widely, sending a copy to the quisling prime minister himself if possible. «Why not, after all? Don't we have Mr. Backa in our service?» he said laughing. «God in heaven knows quite well what a patriot he is now and it is important that the people should know it, as Topçe said to him».

The distribution of that bulletin coincided with another event which Deko had expected, but not quite in the way it happened. The bulletin has been just distributed and the people were perhaps reading the appeal «Throw down the arms!», some with joy, others with fear: when suddenly a volley of shots came from somewhere near the radio station. «Now the readers must

be hiding the bulletin» thought Deko expecting the shots to continue, but they stopped and he thought some nervous guards might have fired at a cat in the night, or a German firing squad might have carried out an execution, or a patrol might have met some resistance and had opened fire.

But it was neither of these. The next morning a special communique of the «Voice of the People» gave the following details: «A unit of the 22nd Brigade of Peza had penetrated last night into the town and killed two German guards by the radio station; than they had carried out without further resistance their mission, arresting a dangerous spy in his house, and had returned quietly to their base».

«How can they allow such things to happen?» asked the prime minister reaching for the telephone to talk to the minister of internal affairs. But the minister could rarely be found in his office or at home these days.

«It is useless, your excellency,» said Mr. Backa with a sigh of resignation. «Read this if you feel your nerves are strong enough,» he added and handed him a copy of the bulletin with the appeal «Throw down your arms» printed in big black letters that spread from one end of the page to the other.

## 2

Emira Velo found the appeal behind the door of her house when she was describing to her mother what she had witnessed some days before at the square of the ministries: the astonishing action of the communists posting their tracts in plain daylight in the centre of the town, the mad riding of Deko on his

bicycle through the bullets, his encounter with a woman in «çarçaf» on the sidewalk...» Who could that woman be?» — she had asked herself... All these things had dampened her zeal and she felt like these too restless hens to which people cut short the feathers of their wings to prevent them from flying over the walls and to keep them within the boundaries of their own courtyards. Now she had lost even that short-lived enthusiasm which Mithat Bey had inspired her with when he had told her about the «imminent» landing of British troops in Albania.

There had been not only no sign of such a landing but, as it appeared from Churchill's inaction, the British must have met with troubles somewhere else. Besides, even if they landed, would the communists allow a former Ballist or social-democrat to occupy a comfortable position and carry on as usual?... Then fratricide would get even worse. No, no. Any effort on her part was purposeless... What could she hope to achieve with the revival of social democracy? A tract by the communists or a threat against Ajet would be sufficient to upset all her plans. The «priceless» advice of Mithat Bey couldn't have any effect now. «I must pull out of that mess and have nothing to do with it any more... It is all over...»

She heard the shots that came from the radio station and dropped the appeal which she had read several times. She looked from the window in the night but saw nothing and, as the firing stopped almost immediately, she returned to her seat and resumed her hopeless meditations. Then, as if spurred by a sudden decision, she jumped up, gathered from her writing desk all the papers she had prepared for the first number of the newspaper of the social-democracy and began to tear to small pieces everything she had written. When she came to an article written in the form of a letter, she read it over once more and put it

aside with the words «I shall need that», then she continued her work of destruction to the end.

Next morning she woke up late. Mrs. Naime had waited impatiently for her to get up and now entered her room alarmed:

«What is going on, my daughter? What is that people are saying? Oh God, have mercy on us!»

Emira opened with some difficulty her sleepy eyes. She had rarely seen her mother so frightened and became alarmed herself.

«I know nothing, Mother. What are people saying?»

«All sorts of horrible things... The partisans have come last night into the town and have killed many Germans; they have taken with them many Albanians who are still working with the Germans... Ajet was so upset that he went out without drinking his coffee. Mr. Eqrem, who came to talk with him about these horrors was also terribly upset... all the blood had gone from his face and he looked pale like death...

The girl was still like in a dream; her eyes were on her mother but her thoughts were elsewhere. Above her mother's grey hair she could see crowds of people with their fists raised high, pouring like so many streams into the streets of the town shouting: «Throw down your arms! Throw down your arms!».

She made an effort to drive away the unwelcome vision and murmured in despair: «That vision is bound to come true. All the strange things that are happening have a logical link between them... How perfectly organized they are!»

Mrs. Naime caught her head with both her hands and cried:

— God, what sins have we committed to deserve such a punishment?



Emira could find none of the people she had been looking for, not even Deko, so she decided to go to Mr. Backa and ask him to print her letter in the newspaper. She hoped that sooner or later Qemal Orhanaj would read that number of the «Bashkimi i Kombit» and would understand that the letter was addressed to him. He would know who the author was not only by the contents of the letter but also by the pseudonym «Arime» with which she had signed it; he had only to reverse the letters by reading it backwards. No doubt, he would be indignant to see her name in a quisling paper, and that would be another weapon against her in his hands, but that did not matter now that she had lost every hope of a reconciliation. Besides, the letter contained nothing compromising for the author. In it the girl expressed some «intimate thoughts» that «referred only to the two of them, to the beautiful past, the dark present and the completely unpredictable future. Who was to blame for their drama? Only Qemal, she thought. Not that the road he had chosen had come to no definite conclusion, as she had once maintained. She had to admit that that road had led to considerable achievements, but these achievements, to which Qemal himself had largely contributed, were not those of his dreams of the past... On the contrary...

And the letter ended on a pessimistic note:

*«Here you are marching victorious... Behind you I can see tears, death and destruction. Whereas you, the desert... In vain you shall seek an old friend to exchange, as in the past, a gentle word, a pure-hearted smile. You will not find him. The bullets of your comrades will have killed him... And you will ask yourself: was this what I have fought for?»*

She did not find Mr. Banka at the office of the paper but his substitute, the poet with the pen-name «Orpheus». He knew her and was glad to do what he could for her. Emira had read his erotic but very insipid verses about which Qemal spoke with disdain, particularly after the occupation, when the poet continued to write his sugary poems in the quisling press.

«This is just what I need for my department,» the young man said after a cursory reading of her manuscript. «And it is fortunate for our literary column to have such a fine piece of prose for tomorrow's issue... Who can write nowadays like that?... It is genuine lyric, deep and coming straight from the heart.»

He repeated the words «from the heart» several times looking her significantly in her eyes.

«Will it be printed?» she asked, cutting short his praises.

«Certainly, certainly, in tomorrow's issue... on the fourth page, in black italic type... But, excuse me, could I ask you a rather personal question... I mean, without any particular intention. Just a poet's curiosity.»

«Yes, of course. What is it you want to know?»

The young man bent his head to one side and began in a confidential manner:

«Thank you... I know you are always so kind, that's why I have admired you for it... in my reserved way... And it must have been a severe shock to you, the disgraceful conduct of that scapegrace... But on the other hand it provided an extremely interesting subject for a love poem... But it doesn't matter. It's just between us that we say such things. Now, will you please tell me in all sincerity, isn't it Mr. Orhanaj, to whom you are addressing your letter? If so, then it serves him right...»

«I don't understand what you mean,» the girl interrupted him with disgust. «How can one write a letter to a dead person?»

«A dead person? O, no, miss! Don't say that. Not more then three months ago I saw him arm-in-arm with one of those illegal hussies in some blind-alley of Tirana.

«I don't believe it! I can't believe it, mister editor...You have given yourself the announcement of his death in your paper last January when you published the list of the killed bolsheviks.»

— Leave the paper alone. Newspapers are propaganda means, and lies are the principal raw material of our propaganda...But I...» Here the young man put his hand over his heart, sighed and continued with a subdued voice and an apologetic smile. «I am speaking to you from the depth of my heart... as a sincere admirer of your writtings...of your ideal... and, if you allow me to say so, of the charms nature has bestowed on you... And I am glad that you have got rid of that man who is not worth the tip of your finger...»

Emire was so exasperated and disgusted by the unexpected irritating manner of the man that she had to clench her teeth tight to prevent herself from telling him what she thought of him. She looked several times at her watch to show him that she had no time to waste and finally gave him three limp fingers which he grabbed in both his hands. As she was walking out avoiding to look at him, she asked dryly.

«So, I can expect you to print my letter, regardless of the person for whom it is intended?»

«Most certainly, Miss, you must have no doubt about it.»

## CHAPTER IV

### I

Netka heard Deko's steps as he walked in without knocking, rubbing his hands with satisfaction.

«You seem in high spirits today,» she said as she swallowed the last mouthful, of bread and scrambled eggs left over from last night's supper. «You have come with new plans, it seems.»

«Leave our plans alone now. It is the business of others to make them. Now you must get ready to lock your house for some time. Your headquarters will be elsewhere from now on.»

«Elsewhere?...» she said somewhat puzzled as she put the empty plate on a box behind the door. «And what about the boy.»

«It's the others again who are going to take care of him, too, don't you worry about that.»

The woman could not help being worried and it was clear that she could not bear the thought of being separated from her only son.

«Why are you staring at me like that? Don't you understand this place is soon to become a battle field?... The partisans have encircled Tirana and...they may attack at any moment... You see?»

He had noticed the change in her face, but caught her by the arm and began to walk with her up and down the room, talking excitedly:

«So you see, my dear Netka, the day we have so long been waiting for is coming at last. Zef, Alert, Arta and that stalwart husband of yours, who has been given command of a battalion, are expected here pretty

soon. Eh, we are going to make a fine feast of it, I can assure you.»

Only then he saw that Netka was not sharing his excitement but was keeping her eyes low.

«What is the matter with you, aren't you happy?» he said. «Wait a minute. Let me have a look at your eyes.»

Netka raised her eyes to look at him and tried to smile, but there was too much sadness and apprehension in them.

«Are you a communist or not?» Deko reproached her.

«I am, of course I am!» her voice sounded strange without the lively notes that had characterized it lately.

«Then why are you scared, my dear. It isn't at all like you.»

«I am not scared about myself, Deko, you ought to know it... But I can't be happy, as you are. I have something here in my heart which blocks my joy... It makes me feel bad to leave the house, I don't know why... Then, the fight inside the town is not going to be a flower garden, as you imagine, but a stormy sea. I have no doubt that we will drive the Germans out, but we will lose many comrades, too. Am I wrong?»

His face showed that he did not share her fears.

«Don't look at me like that. Listen to me. I want to open my heart to you like to a brother. I don't fear about myself and I wish to be the first to die so as not to see others dying. And I will die with joy because I had the satisfaction of seeing Galip Bey dead and Safet Backa shaking with fear. Never in my life have I been so happy as I am now and I hope you will live to enjoy the same happiness. But I don't want to experience new sorrows after all I have suffered. I fear that these new sorrows will come, and then I'll make a mess of it and be ashamed of myself. That is my worry, believe me.»

Deko had not expected to hear such an outpour of words from a communist after all the work of education they had done with her. He could not understand her. Was it possible that a communist like her did not want to see the country liberated? Then what was the sense of their struggle! No, there must be something wrong in it, some weakness, something that has to be rooted out before it grew too big, «as Zef asked the comrades to do whenever they noticed such a thing.» But for the moment he could do nothing to put it right. This was no time to criticize Netka or to reproach her'.

«I believe you,» he said quietly as if her words had made no impression on him. «But as a communist you must live with the faith and conviction that from now on everything will be bright and sunny.»

He told her what he had heard about the defeat and withdrawal of the Germans from the towns of the south and about the reactionary leaders who were preparing to run away.

The situation was changing rapidly. Requests were coming from every part of the country from Ballists and Zogists, even from some of the «big shots», to be admitted to the National-Liberation Movement. It was a problem to sort them out and distribute them in the army. In the «Abdulla bey» quarter near the hospital, a sort of recruiting office had been set up for that purpose and perhaps they would need Netka's help there.

Netka laughed when Deko told her that Mr. Backa and his daughter were among the first to apply. But suddenly she frowned and said thoughtfully:

«So that is the reason why that devil has been taking his valuable things to the houses of his friends. He on one side, his daughter on the other... I haven't told you another thing. That fool of a girl has become a frequent visitor to the Velos. Perhaps she is combining something with the 'beauty with the black locks'.»

For the moment Deko said nothing about those people. Only when he finished giving her the instructions about what she had to do he remarked:

«As for that foolish girl and the 'black locks', don't you worry about them. They are caught in a trap. You can even tell them openly what you think of them if you want to see how they will react.»

«No, no,» laughed Netka: «It is too early yet.»

«But you will do that a few days, anyway, I can assure you.»

«Perhaps.»

«Not perhaps but surely... And that would be one of the first compensation we shall have for all the bitterness we have suffered.»

«Bitterness...suffering. You are quite right.» The woman bent her head to one side and looked at the boy with happiness, sadness, hope and doubt mingled together.

«So long,» said Deko glad to see a change in her mood.

Netka could not reply. She nodded several times with her head and followed the boy with her eyes until he disappeared behind the hedge.

Then she hurried in and began to get ready for her departure, humming a tune which her boy had been singing of late:

It's for peasants and the workers...that we have risen up in arms...

## CHAPTER V

### 1

The mix-up was gathering momentum.

The First Army Corps had taken possession of practically all the central and northern parts of the country, while other forces of the National Liberation Army, coming from the south, had occupied the territory north of the Shkumbini River, from the highlands of Darsia to the Adriatic coast and were waiting for orders to march on Durrës and Tirana. An iron ring was surrounding the enemy forces hemmed in their last dens. The Germans held only the automobile road linking Tirana with Greece, passing via Korça and Elbasan but even that road came frequently under the attacks of the units of the 2nd Brigade which harassed enemy motorized columns and blew up bridges or sections of the road where the passage was more difficult.

The lights of the Continental Hotel where General Fitstum was staying and the former «Casa del Littorio», which General von Gleib had made his residence, were kept shining throughout the night. The rare quislings who came to the offices of the generals wore on their faces signs of impending disaster. Information came irregularly and was often contradictory, so that suspicions had arisen that there was diversion even among the ranks of the Gestapo.

Major Ficht had been called to report to the two generals and to explain from what sources he had obtained his latest information on the basis of which the comand had undertaken a very costly and comple-



tely futile operation. The major, who was not prepared for such questions, took from his small case a file of documents and showed the generals a number of messages sent to him by «Kryqi», the most reliable agent they had among the partisans of Peza. He explained to his superiors who that agent was.

«Don't you communicate directly with him?» asked von Gleib.

«No, here general. The story of that man is long and complicated. But Mr. Backa, who is in direct contact with him, has guarantees which exclude any possibility of double dealing on his part.»

«Nevertheless...» General Fitstum got to his feet. His long face with prominent cheekbones and fleshless cheeks looked like that of a dead man. «Nevertheless, we are obliged to believe in the results rather than in Mr. Backa's guarantees... You must arrange without delay a thorough control of the activity of that agent... and of all the other agents.»

Major Ficht saluted and went out with his head in turmoil.

Another officer, wearing the rings of the liaison service on his sleeve and carrying a dossier under his arm, came in a minute later. He gave the Nazi salute and placed on the table before the general a ciphered cable in which the decoded words were underlined with red pencil.

The general read the message, told the officer to go out and turned to von Gleib:

«Nothing doing, my dear. Take a look at this. It is given by General Oberst von Rendulitz himself, the general commander of our troops in the Balkans.»

He passed the message to his colleague and added:

«It is unbelievable, unbelievable...»

He lit a cigarette, pulled at it only once, then let it burn between his fingers while he stared vacantly at the ceiling, moving his lips without producing any sound.

«At any rate, our troops in Greece have received orders to come to Tirana,» said General von Gleib to give himself courage.

«Do you think we can hold out with our units without them? No, my dear friend. Only the timely arrival of our divisions from Greece, provided they don't suffer too heavy losses on their way, can give us hope of success. But that does not depend only on our good will...»

2

Mr. Backa was frightened to death when they woke him at two o'clock after midnight to tell him that Major Ficht wanted him urgently at his office, but when the major told him what the matter was, he took a breath of relief.

«It is impossible, absolutely impossible!» he cried, and his voice sounded so convinced that the major could not doubt his sincerity. «Ismail would be shot immediately by the communists if what you say is true. We have only to publish his declaration, and...»

He took from his breast-pocket a black wallet full of documents, picked out a piece of paper and handed it to the major.

«This is clear enough, herr major, isn't it? I am holding him tight. Besides, we have the double guarantee of his engagement to my daughter.»

The major's eyes were on the document, but he was not reading it, not that he did not understand its contents, but another thought had come to his mind. He left Mr. Backa alone in the office and walked quickly to another office where three men were bend-

ing their heads over a table examining under the powerful light of the lamps and with the aid of magnifying lenses a pile of documents, photos and fingerprints. When he returned, he found Safet Bey smoking a cigarette. The frown in the major's face gave him the chills for the second time that night, and he began to suspect, not that the Gestapo had discovered traces of his latest activities, but that Ismail himself could have betrayed him. To Mr. Backa this would be the same as to save himself from the river and be drowned in the sea... Trying to maintain his composure, he was waiting with anxiety to hear what the major was going to say.

Major Ficht was under impression of the grave and humiliating fact he had discovered in the other office and paid no attention to the change that had come over Mr. Backa's face. The handwriting of Ismail's declaration was not identical with that of the messages sent by the agent „Kryqi“. How could that happen to Major Ficht who had received so many praises and had been awarded decorations for his espionage activity? What could he report to General Fittum tomorrow when his investigations would bring out the bitter truth?

He knew that for understandable reason his agents were obliged to counterfeit their handwriting every now and then when they sent in their information, but that could be an excuse only for Mr. Backa, «that miserable Albanian», not for the meyor who, regardless of the faith Backa had in his son-in-law, ought to have carried out a double control, as he had done on many other occasions.

Judging from the major's black face, Mr. Backa expected him to point his revolver at his head and force him to admit his treason, but instead of that, the Major invited him to sit down and spoke to him quietly in the broken Albanian he had picked up during his stay in the country:

«They have deceived us, Mr. Backa. They have deceived both you and me... Me, Major Ficht!... Yes, that is quite certain... That «Kryqi» of yours is working for the reds.»

He fixed his eyes on Mr. Backa, perhaps to observe the impression his words would make on his friend's face. In fact, Mr. Backa was both frightened and genuinely indignant, and his expression of disappointment was so sincere that it convinced the major.

Mr. Backa got to his feet, caught his hair with both his hands in a gesture of despair and wanted to say something to justify himself, but the major did not let him.

«Bitte, bitte. You mustn't say anything. We are sure that you have always been and shall remain a faithful friend of the Reich.»

3

Safet Bey returned home by dawn and, since he knew that he would not be able to sleep, did not go to his bedroom but drank two cups of brandy and sat down in an armchair in the sitting-room.

He stayed physically and mentally inert for some time, different thoughts began to flash through his head, some giving him hope, some driving him to despair. Finally he came to the conclusion that he could not definitely decide whether Ismail had played false only to the Germans but not to him. He wished that Ismail, for the sake of his love for his daughter, Edda, had not committed a second error. And it was quite evident that it was so, because the partisans were maintaining their good links with Mr. Backa.

At any rate, the first thing Mr. Backa had to do was to take contact with Ismail and ask him to explain the whole thing. It was not easy. He closed his eyes and tried to think how he could arrange it, but he was too excited and unable to think coherently...

Miss Edda, who came as usual to bring his coffee in his bedroom at seven o'clock, was surprised to find him in the sitting room.

Mr. Backa opened his eyes and jumped up frightened when his daughter playfully put her hands over his eyes to surprise him.

For a moment he thought that all the events of the night before had been a dream and laughed cheerfully responding with caresses to his daughter's caresses:

«My dargling girl... My precious jewel...»

«When are we leaving?» asked the girl eagerly. «You know, father, when I didn't find you in the bedroom, I thought you had gone away without me. 'How could he do that to me,' I said to myself. 'To go away and leave me alone? No, no. He could not do it'.»

The old man stared at her with a new expression, as though he was not sure whether that was his daughter or someone else. The girl stepped back frightened:

«What is the matter with you?»

He took his eyes off her and looked around the room. He saw the empty brandy cup and everything came back to him. He made an effort to regain his composure and said:

«It is nothing, my dear. Don't get upset. There is nothing the matter with me...»

He took her in his arms, stroked her head and her shoulders and, in a voice that he tried to make as gentle as possible, added:

«Wouldn't you like to stay for a few days with Miss Velo?»

«No!» she said holding him tight. «Why should I?»

«You must go, you must go... It is the best way for all of us... And you won't leave her house unless I send for you. You may need to stay there several weeks, even one or two months. Only with Miss Velo I will be sure that you are safe.»

The girl did not like it and a shadow of sadness fell over her face. Her father held the Velo family in high esteem, particularly their daughter, and lately had allowed Edda to pay frequent visits to Emira, but his insistence that Edda should stay there for weeks and months convinced her that something must have gone wrong.

«You will go,» he repeated looking aside to avoid her sad eyes.

Edda shook her head with disappointment.

«You must have some serious trouble to ask me to stay away from you for such a long time. Why don't you tell it to me? I may be a little light-minded, that is what Emira thinks too, but not to the extent...»

She burst into tears and could not finish her thought. Moved by her tears. Safet Bey took her in his arms:

«My darling girl, my only daughter... Why do you want to break my heart? I will tell you frankly, my position is not secure. But you must keep your head and be patient! I hope that, with God's help, everything will be all right...»

The girl heard without blinking the story of all the strange and complicated intrigues and shady combinations in which her father had played a leading role.

## PART EIGHT

...and a ... ..  
... ..

... ..  
... ..  
... ..  
... ..  
... ..

... ..  
... ..  
... ..  
... ..  
... ..

... ..

... ..  
... ..  
... ..  
... ..  
... ..

... ..  
... ..  
... ..

... ..  
... ..  
... ..  
... ..  
... ..

... ..  
... ..  
... ..

... ..  
... ..

... ..



## CHAPTER I

### 1

Bimi had been absent from Tirana for some time. He came back on a Monday afternoon, as he had arranged it with Deko, and went straight to Drita's house, but he was half an hour late and, as he found neither Drita or Deko, he began to scold Mother Zela for letting them go without leaving word where they were and when they would be back.

«Didn't you ask them, Mother Zela?»

«You ought to have asked them... Where am I to look for them now? I have an urgent business with them. Do you understand what urgent means? It can't wait. It can't wait at all, I assure you.»

The woman saw that the boy was seriously upset and felt sorry for him.

«What could I do, poor me? As if I could know that it was important... What could I do?»

«They ought to have left a note, at least,» he said, and was about to go out.

«A note?» Mother Zela started as if awakened. «I almost forgot it... They did give me a note... They said it was for you.»

With her trembling fingers she undid a knot she had tied in the corners of her headkerchief and took out a crumpled piece of paper which Bimi snatched from her hands, read the two lines written on it and threw his arms round the old woman:

«You are a pearl, dear, a rare jewel! And you almost spoiled the whole thing. Well, so long now, and death to fascism! And I hope we shall soon be celebrating the wedding of that naughty daughter of yours.»

The old woman locked her hands, bent her head to one side and followed with smiling eyes the boy to the gate.

2

Bimi found not only Drita and Deko at Uncle Kristo's house, but a whole group of comrades, young boys and girls, whom he had not seen for a long time.

Uncle Kristo, acting on received instructions, led Bimi directly into the big room where a meeting was being held, but at that moment they were all silent. He supposed that Deko, who was standing with some notes in his hand, had made some important proposal and was waiting to hear the opinion of the comrades. But they were all looking fixedly at their notes and only now and then were glancing at Deko.

When Bimi entered, they all turned their heads to see who it was. Deko, who had been expecting Bimi impatiently, ran to him with open arms.

«Come in, come in,» he said. «Where have you been all this time? Did the mountain air do you so good that you could not tear yourself from it in time?»

The next to come and embrace Bimi was Netka. Then followed all the others, some embracing him warmly, others shaking hands with him. Only Drita, who at that moment had been arranging a sagging stocking, was slower than the rest of them. Bim exclaimed in mock surprise:

«What is all this excitement? Good God! I expected to be scolded for bumping on you without knocking, while you seem to be just waiting for me to rouse you from sleep. But I am not coming from the other world, so you can't expect me to tell you anything of its wonders.»

«You are so charming, that is why we are so happy to see you back, said Drita with her hand extended.

But Bimi drew back as if offended.

«Don't mock me, comrade. Do you think I will fall for that kind of stuff? You can call charming this comrade here,» he patted Deko on the back. «Although I have been brought up among girls, they don't even bother to shake hands with me when they meet me. As it appears, I am doomed to remain bachelor all my life.»

Some of the boys laughed. Drita replied in her own manner:

«You are talking nonsense. Did you imagine we were waiting for you to hear your empty prattle? Have you any good news to tell us? That is what we are thirsty for.»

«That is quite true,» said Deko backing her.

«You want news? And you want fresh ones, of course,» Bimi continued with his banter. «Who is so foolish as to want stale news? But Drita should not make fun of me... As for the news, the other day we received by cable...»

The others began to shuffle, trying to come closer to him. Someone laughed:

«A cable? Ha, ha. You are in a merry mood today, comrade Bimi.»

Bimi shaded his eyes with his hand and looked sternly at the boy who had laughed.

«Is that you, Selami? What are you doing here and in what world do you think you are living? Did you think that our Army Corps has remained so far behind as to be incapable of organizing wireless communications?... Well, let me tell you that that was just the way how we learned that Berat has become the provisional capital of Democratic Albania, that the National Liberation Anti-fascist Council has decided at its latest meeting to act as the provisional democratic government of the country, that it has also decided to give the women equal rights with the men and many other things... Will that satisfy you, comrade Drita? And you, Netka, what do you think of it? By God, I feel sorry for your husband. Ferik will find himself in trouble if he orders you to do something for him. 'I beg your pardon' you will say to him. 'Read first the declaration about the emancipation of the women and then come and try to order me about.' I wonder where the world is going to... Then there was that matter about the congress of the women. That also is going to be held in Berat and will surely have as its main item the equal rights of the women. The women would want to say their word as did the men in Përmet and the youth in Helmës. You can go on talking, Selami, if you still feel like it... But I warn you, you women: don't start your usual bickering when you choose delegates to your congress...»

The comrades, astonished by the wonderful news, were waiting for him to finish and were preparing to pour their questions on him.

«That was all the news I had for you, comrades,» Bimi concluded rather precipitately. «For the rest, my business is with this chairman of yours,» he pointed at Deko, who was surprised no less that the others

at the news Bimi had brought and as disappointed to hear him sum it so briefly. «Now, Deko, the comrades will excuse us, but I have a word with you.»

The others protested:

«You were too brief,» comrade Bimi. «We want to hear more about it; we want you to explain some points that are not altoquite clear to us. No, we can't let you go like this. It would have been better to tell us nothing than to leave us dying with curiosity.»

«Perhaps we too have some questions to ask.» said in one voice Drita and Netka.

«Deko will explain to you everything you want to know later. Now I have too much work on my hands...»

When they were alone in another room, Bimi caught Deko by the arm and began to talk:

«Now you must bend your knees and, like the grasshopper, prepare yourself for the big jump... You see what I mean?»

«No. What is it?» Deko became serious as if expecting the bad part of Bimi's news.

«Zef is in Tirana,» Bimi said slowly.

«Zef in Tirana? Are you serious? When did he come?»

«Of course, I am serious. He arrived two days ago?»

«Two days in Tirana and not to let me know it!»

«Well, it may be a surprise to you, but why should you expect him to report to you?»

Deko looked at him embarrassed.

«This it too presumptuous on your part, my dear comrade,» continued Bimi. «Are we supposed to know all the secrets of the Party?»

Deko's embarrassment increased. He was disappointed that Zef had been two whole days in Tirana and had not sent word to him. Could that mean that Zef did not include him among the comrades with

whom he could talk freely about the problems of the organization?

Doubts began to cross his mind: «I am surprised. He never showed any dissatisfaction of my report last July... Perhaps he has heard about my engagement to Drita and it has shaken his confidence in me... Yes, that must be it... Why did Bimi tease Drita and why did he call me presumptuous?... I am sure I have never neglected my duties to the Party and will never neglect them.»

«So, Zef is in Tirana,» muttered Deko pretending not to have given too much weight to the accusation of being presumptuous.

«Yes, he is here. And here I have a letter from him with instructions for you.»

«Instructions!» thought Deko bitterly. «As if he could not meet me and give his instructions directly to me.»

«Yes,» continued Bimi. «Until tomorrow morning you must collect as much information as you can about the conduct and aspirations of the persons listed here.» He gave Deko a list of twenty-five names written in Zef's handwriting. The list included mostly intellectuals, doctors, agronomists and others, among them Emira Velo, the only one he knew personally.

«What are these people?» asked Deko. «Have they committed crimes or...»

«No, man! Not crimes. Did you think we want to shoot them? No. As far as I know, we must try and prevent them from running away after the Germans, which would be a grave mistake on their part. You see what I mean?»

«Yes, yes? What else?» said Deko impatiently.

«Then there is another thing,» Bimi looked at the letter and pretended to be reading from it. «Apart from Deko and Bimi, nobody else should know that Zef is in Tirana. Is that clear?»

«Yes, of course. Is there anything else?»

«The third point is the most important and should be kept absolutely secret. Tomorrow, at half past four in the afternoon, you will meet comrade Zef at a house on the 'Hoxha Tahsim' street. The number of the house is written in red at the foot of the list of names I gave you.

«Well, this is...» Deko's face brightened and he began to rub his hands with satisfaction and to talk with hardly repressed excitement and delight. «This ought to have been the first point, you cruel idiot! Why did you leave it for the end? You see that the other fellow's house is on fire and you ask him to light your cigarette. But I should have suspected it, knowing what you are.»

«You have no house to fear that it can be set on fire,» laughed Bimi and, looking again at his notes, added: «Here, that appointment with Zef is the first item, but I deliberately left it for the end to test your psychology... You know, it used to be Albert's method... And you can't deny that my test was successful... You are too susceptible, comrade Deko. Don't you agree with me? As a matter of fact, Zef did not come two days ago but today, together with me... Ah, and he asked me to tell you another thing which I almost forgot. He wants you to return to him the diary which he has sent to you with a messenger last summer.»

## CHAPTER II

### 1.

For 36 hours Zef Moisiu had shut himself like in a prison cell in the separate room of the house of the «bald man», with the door locked, one window looking on a wall two meters off. The other with the shades lowered. It was annoying but it was the place from which he could best accomplish the duty he had undertaken.

This was the second time that Zef was staying in that house and yet he could not get rid of the feeling of apprehension he had felt when he had first stayed in the house of Risto and Evgjenia where he had experienced moments of joy and disappointment. He could not forget the tragic end of Ropani after they had met in the very same room four months before and when he had been killed some five hundred meters from the house... Now the day of victory was near, but it was sad to remember at such a moment the comrades who had fallen.

Two or three times a day Zef saw the landlord, the bald man with the rare eyebrows and shifty eyes, who no longer gave Zef the impression of wickedness which he had had the first time.

Only the wife of the bald man suspected that there was a «stranger» in the separate room, but she was one of those women to whom the wishes and words of her husband were law that could not be questioned. But from her husband's special orders, from his stealthy movements and from the way he was putting aside food «for an old friend who was in jail for unpaid debts», she understood that he was hiding somebody



in that room and could not sleep in peace, but she could not discuss the matter with her husband.

She was worried because she did not know what kind of a man her husband was hiding at such a dangerous time when they killed you outright at the slightest suspicion.

Had it been some time before, the woman would have known that the man was a communist, because those of the other parties had no reason to hide themselves. But now the situation had changed. Although she was supposed to know nothing about politics, she had heard that other people had begun to hide, even those who had worked with the Germans, and that squads of partisans entered the town in the night to control the suspicious houses and led away some poor devil who had too many sins on his conscience. Her greatest concern was Major Jahja of the gendarmerie who, they said, had lost his head and was sleeping every night in a different house. She would have liked the partisans to find him and deal with him as he deserved, because he had been the cause of too much suffering and many deaths, but if they found him in their house, her husband also could not hope to escape punishment, since it was wrong to give refuge to a man like the major, detested and cursed by everybody... She still hoped that her husband had not made such a terrible mistake...

Her fears increased to such a point that she decided to speak about it to her husband.

The husband raised his eyes and smiled.

«That is none of your business, my wife,» he said.

«Yes it is,» she took courage to reply. «I am terribly worried to think what could happen to the children.»

She expected him to strike her, but he only screwed up his mouth and said nothing.

«You may think what you want,» she continued,

but I can't stay without telling you about the fears that I have here in my heart... Who is that man whom you are hiding in our house in these dangerous times?»

«So you have known it all the time. And you go on pretending to be ignorant,» the man said calmly. «He is a friend of mine.»

«I know he is a friend of yours... And I can imagine who is that friend for whom you risk your life and can bring misery to all of us. It is not death that I fear or homeless poverty, because we all have to die sooner or later, but I fear the shame that will stain our name. I don't mind dying, but I don't want to die disgraced forever.»

Moved by these words, which he had never expected to hear from the mouth of his wife, the man, looking at her with curiosity mixed with tenderness, stood reflecting for a minute, then understood the true cause of her concern.

«Wait a minute, you. What friend do you suppose I am hiding in the house?»

«Who else but that accused devil who has broken the hearts of so many people and who, now that he feels his end coming, found nothing better but try to save his skin by endangering yours and that of your family,» the woman burst out.

The man squinted, but there was a note of warm satisfaction in his voice when he spoke again.

«Was it major Jahja you had in mind?»

«Yes.»

«Well... You are quite wrong here! Do you think I could be so completely crazy? I have kept my name unstained for five years when all those damned friends and relatives of mine were doing all they could to draw me over to their side; must I do it now when they are on the brink of the precipice? Eh, my dear wife! You ought to have known me better than that...»

In the evening, having put the children to sleep,

the man and the woman went together to pay a visit to their illegal guest.

At first the woman, who had never seen an «illegal», felt embarrassed and restricted her conversation to the few conventional words of welcome, but Zef, who had divined her state of mind, spoke to her in a manner which made her feel at ease and forget her worries over the risk they were running on his account.

## 2

For Zef the evening passed more agreeably than usual. He hoped he would sleep better that night, but it was still too early to go to bed, so he tried to find something to do for an hour or two.

In a corner behind the bed spring set directly on the floor, he found a pile of old numbers of the «Bashkimi i Kombit» and among them a book. He picked up first the book, read the title and the name of the author and dropped it as if it had burned his fingers. Then he laughed at himself. It was a new volume entitled «Selected love poems» and the author was «Orpheus». Then he glanced through the pages of the newspapers, reading only the headlines of the articles and the names of their authors. Every now and then he found something that promised to be more interesting and read it through, although it nauseated him. Most of the numbers were from August and September which he had not read during his absence from Tirana.

It was entertaining to read the pretentious phrases with which the quisling journalists praised the nazi «neutral» attitude to Albania or the desperate appeals

to the Albanian youth to return to «the long-suffering bosom of their motherland». One of the latest numbers had a headline, «Professor Beria has taken over the general command of the national army», which was supposed to be the most important event of the day. According to the paper, that event meant a «decisive turn for the destiny of the nation». Zef could not believe that the man who was the object of such high praises was the same professor Beria of the time of Mr. Bardhi, the same self-conceited quack who invariably ended his conversation with Hamlet's «To be or not to be!» «What a comedy!» said Zef to himself and laughed.

He folded the paper and was about to throw it back to the pile at the corner and read no more, but his eye caught a strange headline under a flowery vignette and the text printed in black italic type on the fourth page. That was obviously a literary piece of those of the «unity of the Nation» published every now and then. Zef, who was always curious about literary writings, glanced at the bottom to see who was the author. The pen-name «Arime» was new to him but it roused his curiosity and he began to read the text. From the first lines he felt that the style was familiar and, by reversing the name of the author, he easily found out who it was... At last Emira Velo had been obliged to admit that the «amorphous crowd» and those «commissars who did not know, to hold a pen» were going on much better than her highly valued «élite». But she did not want to give up her arms altogether and had found a new way of holding on her own: «*I can see neither victors non vanquished. Only death and destruction! Do not rejoice, you who are happy; do not drink poison, you who are poisoned! The end is the same for all...*».

«How profoundly philosophical! She has outdone Schopenhauer» he said sarcastically to himself. «But she is not entirely wrong as far as she is concerned,

the young lady. The screech-owls screech just like her before dawn. They know no other world than their own world of darkness and shadows and are convinced that with its destruction, everything else will come to an end. That is why they scream «Death, death!» But behind that cry of despair they conceal the venomous fangs of the serpent. The young lady apparently intends to kill two birds with one stone. She wants to put on us dark glasses so as to see the world as she sees it, dark, without hope, crumbling down... At the same time she wants to offer her friends a good dose of morphine in these days of agony so as to help them meet death with more serenity... Or perhaps she intends it to be a tranquillizer for the blind thousands who risk to see the precipice towards which Mithat bey has been guiding them and divert them from demanding retribution... Then, reading between the lines, one can see that the heart of the young lady is bleeding for the «cream of patriotism» who are dying with the stamp of treason on their foreheads, and is trying to put the blame for it on others.»

«We did not want that war with the occupiers,» — the young lady explained. «not because we were resigned to slavery but because we knew it would lead to fratricide, as it did, to ruin, to the complete annihilation of the nation. Who will answer for this? Who else but the intransigent communists who refused to listen to us. Now they will reap what they have sown: death and disgrace together. We shall emerge pure before history. That is why we do not regret the loss of our lives.» «These are tricks used by petty thieves who hide the stolen frying-pan but cannot hide its long handle» thought Zef.

He threw away the paper with disgust, took off only his jacket, put out the light and lay in his bed without undressing. He tried to put the girl out of his mind but she would not be driven off. He saw her frowning face as he had seen it that day with

Vaso in the Dibra street, with her arched eyebrows locked on her forehead, glaring at him ready to cover him with invectives, but he did not give her the opportunity.

«You told us first that we were butting against the wall with our heads; we persisted, and the wall began to give way. Then you told us that the big building is most dangerous when it falls; we did not care, and the building began to topple down threatening to crush, not us, but you who were supporting it and trying to prevent it from falling. Then you pointed your guns at us and threatened to blow us to pieces, but we ignored your threats because the voice of the Fatherland, groaning under the heel of the occupier and calling its sons to its aid, was the most imperative appeal to every true patriot... Hundreds and thousands fell among our ranks and died as it becomes the sons of the eagle fighting against the enemy. That is how Vaso died. Do you remember the «mannerless» comrade? At the time of his death you were kissing the boots of the enemy, hiding him with your own bodies. And when our bullets hit you in his front-lines, you cried «Fratricide!» Your own mothers cursed the day you were born, and the land on which you grew up revolted against you, but you did not budge from the enemy trenches. You rushed at us together with him, knife in hand, against your brothers and sisters, and still you continued to cry «Fratricide!» and «Down with fratricide!» Day and night you wallowed in the mire of treason and cried «Death to the traitors!» You were dying among the ranks of the enemy, under the orders of the foreigner, and yet you boasted with the history of Skanderbeg... And now, when the tide of the people's war and revolution is turning, when the long-expected dawn of liberty is approaching and its bright light separates the good from the evil, you are hoping to catch the straw of salvation by using slanders and intrigues, hoping to

jump over the yawning precipice and to sit once again at the head of the banquet.

But no! Never again! The architect who has designed the stronghold of victory has built it strong, with thick gates and secure locks, and no cruel exploiter of the poor will ever be allowed to set foot within its walls.

He shook his head and smiled at the thought that the dispute he had just had with the «shades of darkness» could make a good comment for the bulletin of the «Zëri i popullit». He could write it also in the form of an open letter. But to whom could he address it? To Emira Velo who had once been the joy of his life and had now become a bitter gall? Or to himself? To himself, of course! As for Emira Velo, she too must be lying now sleepless with her thoughts quite opposite of his own. He imagined her first, confused, frightened and disarmed before the disappointment to which the road she had chosen had brought her; then, smiling (at a meeting presided by Mithat Bey) before her «master» who was caressing with delight his obedient and charming proselyte. After bringing to his attention a number of hopelessly insoluble problems she is waiting for the miraculous revelations of the «oracle». He looks at her smiling, invites her to come closer to him, puts his arm round her shoulders, strokes her hair, her face and her arms in the attitude of a loving father, whispering to her encouraging words about the «good things which come always at the end», and she drinks his words thirstily... In a corner of the hall is sitting that half wit of her brother Ajeta, rubbing his hands with satisfaction at the sight of his sister conversing as an equal with the «greatest man of the country»... Mr. Kasimati, small in size as well as in intellectual faculties, gives from time to time a cautioning warning to the «father of the nation because he is paying too much attention to that pretty girl, while

others, older and wiser, are waiting to hear his decision.

What decision except «clear out before it is too late», can Mithat Bey communicate to his faithful followers at that critical moment?» To clear out?» — That sounds too undesirable to Mr. Kasimati who has experienced, the «delights» of exile. But the master of the ship knows which way swing the rudder. «Exile is necessary as a tactical and strategic step, temporary, intended to allow the troubled waters to settle,» explains Mithat Bey. «For the time being the reds will seize power; this is quite clear and we can do nothing to stop them. But to seize the power is one thing, to hold it is another... How can the communist gentlemen hope to stay in power when there is no bread in the country, no clothing, no houses, no economic base on which they could rely. I can see quite clearly what is going to happen. The communists will be obliged to turn their eyes abroad. «You need bread?» will ask the English and the Americans (the Russians will say nothing, being even worse off than the Albanians). «Here is bread, clothing, long-term credits, everything you like...» But you know what happens when a poor small country accepts bread and other gifts from abroad... Isn't that so, Hajdar Bey?»

Hajdar Bey is persuaded but in his turn, as a leader of the nationalist front, he asks to be taken with the first batch of exiles.

«Must we forget the leaders of our social democracy?» asks Mithat Bey still caressing Emira, who finds no words to express her gratitude for his solicitude.

«Certainly, certainly,» assents Mr. Kasimati with his childish giggle...

«These are only day-dreams», Zef said to himself, «but there can be no doubt that these gentlemen will run away to save themselves and will also try to persuade other people to follow their example, people



who have done nothing wrong and could give a valuable contribution to the rebuilding of the country. That we must prevent at all cost...»

He tried to work out the tactic he should use with the people he was going to meet the morning. Deko, who had come to see him the day before at the appointed hour, had told him that, with the exception of the girl who had plainly refused, all the other persons in the list had consented to put themselves at the disposal of the Movement. He felt reassured and tried once more to sleep. But sleep would not come. He switched on the light, looked at his watch and saw that it was five minutes to four. It was almost dawn and it was no use to try to sleep. He sat up in his bed, reclining on the pillows and tried to find something to keep himself occupied. He discarded the thought of reading the quisling newspapers; his nerves were not strong enough for that. Then he remembered the packet of letters and the diary that Deko had brought to him. He began to examine them one by one, particularly the diary, an ordinary notebook with checkered lines in which he had written his impressions and thoughts in his small but neat handwriting. The long journeys and the intensive work of the three last months had not prevented him from writing down the most important events of that period. He read it all, from the beginning to the end, and it came as a counterweight to the void that had created in his soul the inconsistent writings of the quisling authors and the wild conversation he had with Emira Velo's ghost.

He felt an urge to express in some way the thoughts and feelings that were boiling in him at that moment. He tried to write in verse, read the first two lines, did not like them and scratched them out. Then he began a letter to comrade Toja... That was a fortunate idea... He had to answer to a letter he had received from Toja three days ago. He took the letter from

a secret pocket in his jacket and began to read it although he had read it several times before. The letter was long and sounded like a novel describing the events of the three last months in the Peza group which had recently been reorganized into a brigade. Alert was one of the leading cadres of the brigade, and Toja was writing of him with particular sympathy, mentioning a number of occasions on which Alert had given proof of rare qualities as a leader and organizer ... Shtëllunga and Skampa were not lagging far behind him... Then there was Arta who had also proved a capable worker. Toja was wondering at the contrast between the outward appearance of that quiet and almost childlike girl and her internal fire, which burst out whenever the circumstances required it. She was soon leaving for Berat for the Women's Congress. Toja himself had proposed her for a delegate to the Congress but now he almost regretted it, because he was sure that she was going to distinguish herself at the Congress and be named to another duty, so that the brigade would miss her...

*"The messenger Veli keeps mentioning you,"* Toja was writing in his letter. *"But of his old task he has retained only the memory, because he is now commissar of a battalion of those who are always mentioned in our communiqués... He is engaged to be married, and you can imagine to whom: to that peasant girl from the Tirana villages of whom I have spoken to you. Her name is Hajrije. Now she is a partisan in the third company of his battalion... But now something more to the point. You have surely heard about our latest undertakings in Tirana. They are mostly exploits of Veli's battalion. He seems to know all the secrets of the reactionaries. He has decided one of these days to capture Major Jahja and bring him here alive; he says he can do it with a unit of his battalion and with the help of the comrades of Tirana. What is your*

*opinion? Is the game worth the candle? I don't think so. Alert, who has a special grudge against the major, also thinks that it isn't worth while. Particularly now that, try as hard as they can, they won't escape us.»*

Zef underlined the last lines with his pencil and put the letter aside. «The comrade is making a mistake here», he thought to himself. «The traitors of that caliber may well succeed in escaping. They are as resolute as many of us in their way. At least some of them like Petrit Kasimati.

In fact, the attitude of that criminal had so astonished Zef that he could not put him out of his mind after all these months. Why did he commit that desperate suicide? Because he could not conceive Albania without Mithat Bey and was convinced that there could be no Albanian nation without the great man, no Albanian life. Wasn't Emira's attitude the same? The two of them were indeed made for each other, the young lady and the captain... She had been wrong to give up the bey's son for Zef's sake... «But how could I foresee what would happen? She appeared so frank, so determined...»

He rubbed his hands, glad to have got rid of the macaber ghost of the quisling captain, which every now and then haunted him, and began to write his letter to Toja.

He had not finished it yet when he heard some whispering sound in the yard. He put down his pen, put out the light and went to the window overlooking the yard. He raised a corner of the curtain, pulled carefully the cord that moved the window shade and looked through its slits. He could see nobody in the yard. The pale moon that appeared from among the scattered clouds was illuminating weakly the scene. The town was quiet. He put an ear against the window shade and tried to listen; now he could catch more distinctly the whispering that came from the wall which separated the bald man's yard from that of his neigh-

bour. Zef remembered that quisling neighbour who was staying in his house the previous summer when his street door was constantly guarded by two or three gendarmes. But that evening the landlord had told Zef that the neighbour had gone away with his family and had left in the house only his housekeeper, a rather good looking woman.

Zef's curiosity became more acute when he distinguished some of the words that were whispered:

«We shall have to climb over the wall, there is no other way.»

«It is too high on the other side. Shall we try it here?»

«All right. Let's try it...»

Zef heard the shuffling noises of people trying to scale the wall by climbing one over the other, then came a thud and immediately after that a loud knocking at the door of the other house. A window was opened and a woman's voice asked, «Who is there?»

«We are of the gendarmerie, madam, don't get frightened,» came a voice from outside. «We only want to see the major.»

There was silence for a while. Then the woman came down to open the door. A group of men entered, and the noise of their boots showed that they were armymen. Then came a scream from the woman, which immediately stopped as if someone had put his hand over her mouth.

There was something muffled in the noise the men were making as if they were doing something indecent, and Zef felt sorry for the woman. But a little later he heard an order: «March ahead, you scurvy!» The man to whom the order was addressed began to shout as if caught in a terrifying situation, but Zef could distinguish only «Allah! Allah!» Another voice was also trying to say something but it sounded like the cackle of a wounded magpie and the words could not be distinguished.

When they came to the street door, Zef saw many partisan uniforms and among them two men like two white phantoms in their shirts and drawers, tied to each other and swaying drunkenly.

«It is all over with Major Jahja and Corporal Brahja. Come along, comrades,» said one of the partisans who had surrounded the house.

«The brandy was to blame,» said a woman's voice, «they had drunk too much.»

«Get away, you hussy! You seem to be sorry for the dog,» said one of the men, in whom Zef recognized Baxhuli, with whom he had once travelled to the south. He raised the shade of the window to speak to them, but it was too late: Baxhuli and his comrades were running to join the others.

Zef returned to his bed, switched on the light and for the third time resumed writing his letter to Toja.

He had not finished it yet when the sun was rising and the landlord came knocking at his door with his breakfast. He was writing a long letter to comrade Toja, a very long letter.

### CHAPTER III

*Free zone. 29 October 1944*

*Dear Toja,*

*Today is the third day since I came back to Tirana. You must not be surprised that I am dating my*

letter from the «free zone». I am not doing it to mix up my traces. It is true that I have been advised to keep my whereabouts as secret as possible for these three days, but now these precautions seem unnecessary because the part of Tirana where I have chosen my base is almost as free as any other free zone. The Germans come this way from time to time but only in daytime and in the three main streets of the quarter where their armoured cars can pass and they avoid the narrow streets. As for the local thugs, the gendarmes and the Ballists, they are nowhere to be seen except in the central squares and streets of the town. Many of them are digging trenches round the town, but I don't think they will serve any purpose. As a matter of fact...

. . . . .

Toja, my dear Toja. I had to interrupt my writing and now I don't remember what I intended to say after that «As a matter of fact» which will have to remain uncertain and suspended in mid-air...I had to interrupt it for a very strange and unbelievable reason. Your Major Jahja (who is also mine) came suddenly to the end of his career together with his faithful Corporal Brahja, the only «faithful» left to him after the «mysterious» disappearance of Corporal Noga. And it happened right here, under my eyes though I had no chance to congratulate the comrades who carried out the astonishing action. They captured the major and the corporal in the house of a neighbour where the criminals felt they were safe. Our boys took them away as they surprised them in their shirts and drawers. And they are surely taking them to the headquarters of the Army Corps, although I am afraid that your scapegrace Baxhuli may do something rash to them on the way there ... But no, Baxhuli knows very well now all the rules and will restrain his im-

pulses until they are brought before the people's tribunal.

But that was not included in the plan of my letter... First I wanted to thank you for your long letter-novel of the 18th of this month, the day of the inauguration of your brigade. You can't imagine, my dear Toja, how happy your letter made me. It found me at the headquarters of the Army Corps, in the village of Shkalla, and I have already read it four times. I also gave it to the others to read it: Rexha was almost in tears when he read what you said about Alert and Skampa. The horrors of the concentration camp at Prishtina have made him very susceptible. But wait a little... Do you know by the way that Rexha with some other comrades had run away and escaped in the day of the tragedy of the 123? I don't think you have, because it is only three days since he «returned safely to his base». He had travelled three days and three nights before he arrived at the headquarters, and had suffered terribly. You could know him only by his voice, all the rest of him had changed completely. Imagine a skeleton, a death's head with eyes sunken deep in their sockets, the skin pale like wax, stretched tense over the fleshless bones of the face, the neck, thin as a reed, holding by miracle the weight of the head. That was what they had made of the once athletic Rexha. You can imagine how we felt when we recognized him.

But we were relieved when we heard the doctor say that Rexha will recover in no time and will soon be his normal self.

He told us how he had suffered at the camp, how the SS had gathered all the prisoners in their barracks and had selected 123 of them, obliging them to dig their own graves before they shot them. We were terribly shaken, and Rexha's voice failed him several times as he spoke, but he did not cry; many of us wept at that point of his narration. He told us

about comrade Epos. — Poor Epos!... You remember the meeting we called a year ago about the «Appeal of Freedom»? His language was literary even when he discussed ordinary matters. He had used the same tone when the Germans were leading them to shoot them. «Farewell, comrades!» he had said. «Don't despair! We are only candles burning for a high ideal. The more we are, the higher will rise the flame which will give light to those who come after us. Long live the Communist Party!» The SS-soldier, who had understood only the two last words, gave him a blow with the butt of his rifle and Epos fell senseless on the ground. That is how they dragged him to the place of execution... The two old men also behaved courageously. Father Sula and Reshit Myzyri, I mean. You remember that Evgenia told us how they were arrested by Rait Mata last May. They were tortured like all the rest but had not opened their mouths, though they knew many things. «They are going to kill us, the ruffians,» had whispered father Sula when the SS had pointed his finger at him. He had turned smiling at Rexha, who was standing next to him, so troubled that he had not understood what was going on, while the old man had seen it clearly. He had fumbled among his rags and drawn out his tobacco box which he passed unnoticed to Rexha, «Take it, and let it see Albania free; it is the only thing left to me from my wealth», the old man had whispered to Rexha, nudging him with his elbow. Then the old man had poured a torrent of abuse at the Germans who were pushing him before them.

Rexha, who had suffered a calvary not much lighter than the men who were shot, had kept the box. He took it out of his pocket and laid it on the table before us. It was a small silver box with mosque Sofia wrought on its cover. With the point of a nail the old man had chiselled a star with five points on top of the minaret. What a paradox! But in that box was



symbolized the drama of a man who for seventy years had lived the life of a wealthy and deeply religious man and at the end had died the death of a revolutionary.

Reshit Myzyri had also taken it quietly. He had frowned and, shaking bitterly his head, had sighed: «I wanted to live a little longer to see with my own eyes how these bastards will pay for their sins. But it was not to be. Nevertheless I am dying with the certainty that my son will see it, that the youth will see it, that all Albania will see it...».

But, my dear Toja, I need a whole winter night to tell the story Rexha told us, and I only wanted to give you some of my impressions of my four months of wonderful partisan life.

Your fine report on Veli, Arta, Alert, Shtëllunga, Skampa and the others gave me much joy. About whom can I write to you? I have met many of the former sympathizers of your group who are now leading detachments in various brigades, but I don't remember their names. You will soon meet them yourself and you will see how much they have changed, even those of whom you were not quite sure.

I have inquired recently about our «affair» with Mr. Backa. It seems he suspects our intentions but is not sure about his would-be son-in-law. His relations with Major Ficht are not what they used to be, either. Deko told me that neither he nor his daughter are staying any more in their house and have gone to some friends, but they have not left Tirana. The man-servant, who guards the house, only shrugs his shoulders when asked about Safet Bey...

\*  
\*   \*  
\*

I see that my letter is getting too long. It is almost morning, and I have not written half of the things I

wanted to write. In half an hour I am expecting to receive information which I am not allowed to reveal to you yet. But before I forget, I must remind you of two things, then, if I have any time left, I will proceed with my gossip.

Firstly, I share your opinion that the action proposed by Veli to capture Hajdar Kasimati together with Major Jahja may result too costly. Major Jahja, as I already told you, is in our hands, and the action will have to be restricted to Kasimati. To take such risks only for that old fool is not worth while. At any rate, you will have to consult the comrades of the Army Corps before you undertake such actions.

Secondly, I don't agree with you or Alert that «the traitors, whatever they do, they will fall in our hands». On the contrary, many of them are already on their way out of the country.

Thirdly, you fear they are going to transfer Arta to some other duty and the brigade will lose a valuable worker. That means that you have not changed your old stand to the questions regarding cadres. You think that your work may suffer if an experienced cadre is taken away from you. You forget that you can always rely on a substitute you can find among the young. This has repeatedly been confirmed during the last two years of our war. We have talked about it on other occasions. Of course, they will put Arta on a new duty, more important and more appropriate for her than the work she is doing with you. So you should not insist on that point, or they will laugh at you.

Now I must say farewell until we meet in liberated Tirana. I have no time to go on with my letter. I hear voices in the yard; from my window I can see the landlord confused before a crowd of unfamiliar people who have invaded the house. Someone shouts my pseudonym, but the landlord knows neither my name nor my pseudonym, to him I am just «the illegal». I

can hear the voice of Ferik Talo threatening him and I have to intervene from the window since I am still locked in. You see, Toja, the news I was expecting is speaking for itself and it is no longer a secret. The partisans are entering the suburban quarters of our capital in orderly formations. Must I tell you why they are coming?

Again farewell till we meet in liberated Tirana.  
Death to fascism — Freedom to the people!

Yours Zef."

## CHAPTER IV

### 1

Uncle Jazi awoke from a nightmare to find that it was too early in the night. He smoked one cigarette after the other until his box was emptied but it was still dark. He was annoyed to think that he had many more hours to wait before the curfew was lifted. He wanted to find a boy who had come to him the day before with a number of tasks which had left the old man in a puzzle. Could it be true, what the boy had told him? House-to-house fighting in all the streets? Judging from the boy's size and his face, he could scarcely be more than a child, but his fiery words and his resolute manner gave signs of maturity. The old man had experienced the same impression with

Piciruku, to whom that boy resembled also in his appearance. The same eyes, the same eyebrows, the same slight body and the same manner of speech. Particularly the manner... What was the name of the boy? The old man scratched his head. «Deko, yes, that was it,» he remembered and was glad that his memory had not failed him. Then again he frowned and began to think: «Do they really expect my wife and the children to be of any help? Can my Xhika, who has never held a gun in her hand, be of any use? And the children?... With old irons and empty barrels, that fellow said. It's pure nonsense! To stop the German tanks with old irons and empty barrels!» Uncle Jazi remembered the big tank which had gone without effort through the thick wall of the big house at the Red Hill on the day when two years ago they had surrounded Vojo Kushi. But Vojo had jumped on the tank and almost blown it to pieces. What a hero!

He noticed some shadows crossing the street. In the twilight he could not distinguish how they were dressed. A little later he saw more clearly ten or twelve men passing quietly in front of his house. Some of them were wearing ordinary civilian clothes and carried no arms, but the others were army men. He rubbed his forehead in an attempt to work it out. The military ones he could understand, but how could the civilians be allowed to be in the street at that hour? Had they been arrested and were now being led somewhere? His dream seemed to be coming true. «The boys may laugh at me, but every time I see bees in my dreams, it means trouble.»

He woke his wife and told her to make the fire. He needed a coffee, although it was not real coffee. His wife got up annoyed. She too, had been dreaming all night but could not remember all her dreams and began to tell what she had seen last. It had to do with their son. He had appeared to her as she had seen him in May at Peza, with the partisan shirt and

a red scarf round his neck and with two catridge belts across his chest. He had craned his neck from behind the door and had asked for a glass of water. She had told him: «Come in, sonny, let me first press you against my heart, then I will give you water and something to eat». But the boy had laughed and said: «I am in a hurry, mother, and my comrades are waiting for me.» and off he was before she could give him water. «You see how foolish your wife is to let him go like that,» she said to her husband.

«It doesn't matter, my dear, it is all right,» said the old man to give her courage. «Water is a bad sign in a dream. You did well not to give him water.»

She had not filled half his cup when they heard knocking at the door and she stared at her husband holding the coffee pot in her hand.

«The door!» said the old man leaving aside his cup, then put on his shoes and hurried down the stairs. Aunt Xhika followed after him with the coffee pot in her hand. Uncle Jazi had reached the door and was waiting for the knocking to be repeated before he asked who it was.

«Open the door, uncle, don't be afraid,» said a familiar voice from outside. The old man lifted the latch, opened the door and was surprised to see two of his neighbours among a group of partisans.

«Did we disturb you?» asked one of the neighbours smiling. The old man took a breath of relief and said nothing. The men began to whisper something among themselves.

«Come in, don't stay outside,» invited them uncle Jazi opening the door wide.

«We won't come in, uncle,» said the neighbour. «We have an important business to do, and these comrades need our help.»

«Our help?» the old man pursed his lips bewildered.

«Yes, man, our help. They will tell us what they want us to do, so come quickly because we have no time to waste.»

Uncle Jazi told his wife that there was nothing to worry about and walked after the group.

He had no idea what it was all about until they reached the Bardhyl Street. He wondered whether he was not still dreaming, or was the neighbour who had called him acting on behalf of the enemy. Uncle Jazi knew him for a decent man, but one could never know... Perhaps these partisans, they were five in all and he had never seen them before, were not partisans at all but men of Xhafer Deva's bands or Ballists dressed like partisans, to deceive the innocent people. Twice he attempted to approach the neighbour and ask him, but the men was continually talking to one of the partisans, a tall fellow with long mustaches, and was walking ahead of the others to show them the way.

Uncle Jazi was reassured only when he saw at the corner of the Bardhyl Street the familiar face of that «funny» partisan with whom he had fallen out when he had been at Peza last summer. The man was standing on guard at the corner holding his automatic ready. To say the truth that rough face of the partisan and his cap tilted over one eye reminded uncle Jazi of the man's «unseemly» conduct some six months ago, when he had made fun of the old man accusing him of trying to rescue his «household rags» at a time when the others were in danger of their lives... The truth had been that Uncle Jazi had been carrying not his «household rags» but the «technique» of the Party, which Rexha had asked him to take to Peza... And now poor Rexha was struggling for his life in the hands of the brutes of the Prishtina concentration camp from which one could come out only dead.

But in spite of that unpleasant memory, the old

man was very pleased to see the partisan and was sorry that he could not remember his name, though he had it on the tip of his tongue. It was a name the comrades had given him for fun but it had stuck. It was a funny name, indeed. Uncle Jazi quickened his pace so that the partisan could see him. Baxhuli pushed back his cap, shaded his eyes with his hand and looked at the old man with curiosity.

«Is that you, uncle?» he said in a high voice when he recognized the old man, breaking the rule of speaking in undertones.

«Welcome, comrade. God has sent you at the right time.»

«No, man, it was not God who sent me; it was this one here that brought me here,» said Baxhuli pointing at his automatic.

«Well, have it your own way,» laughed Uncle Jazi. So you haven't forgotten me, eh?»

«How could I forget an old friend like you?»

Baxhuli would have liked to continue the conversation with the old man but remembering that he had been told to follow the group, he even did not offer the old man a cigarette of the «ready-made» ones, he kept for special occasions, but ran after the others holding his can to keep it from falling off.

Uncle Jazi followed as quickly as he could manage.

People were pouring into the Bardhyl Street from the different narrow streets and passages; some of them were in pyjamas, others were running from one group to another asking questions, exchanging im-

pressions, giving advice... Swarms of small boys had surrounded the partisans, trying to touch their red scarves, their cartridge belts, asking them how many Germans they had killed...

«You couldn't count them, no... You better ask me how many I'm going to kill today and tomorrow,» said Baxhuli laughing.

«How many?»

«As many as there are in Tirana. I won't leave a single one of them alive.»

«And how many Ballists?»

«Ah, the Ballists? Ehee...» Baxhuli could not answer at once and had to reflect a little before he said: «The Ballists are another pair of shoes... We have other plans for them...»

The other streets were also alive with movement, particularly the Hoxha Tahsin Street, in which Uncle Jazi saw many people carrying beams, empty barrels, sacks full of scrap iron and all sorts of other objects. Among them he recognized mother Zela dragging a rusty bed spring which was too heavy for her.

Partisans came and went in small groups exchanging greetings with the people who were watching them with admiration.

The old man did not find it easy to understand what was going on. Being reassured about his earlier suspicions, he began to wonder how the partisans had been allowed to enter the town without a shot fired at them and why no Germans or traitors could be seen anywhere. His logic told him that something really big must have happened, that perhaps the Germans had decided to leave on their own, and the partisans were taking advantage of the opportunity to occupy the town. As for the Ballists and the other traitors, they had probably accepted to lay down their arms in exchange for their lives. Yes, that explained also Baxhuli's words: «For them we have other plans.»

The group of partisans with Uncle Jazi's two



neighbours and Baxhuli had reached a big house with the street door wide open to let in the people who were going into it in groups or separately. Uncle Jazi entered when his turn came. The yard was full of people, partisans and civilians, but mostly civilians, who were listening to a partisan. He was not very tall but he had an authoritative bearing and his eyes and words attracted sympathy and respect. He was wearing a new partisan shirt, a red scarf and a cartridge belt round his waist as well as a «Walter» pistol in a new holster. He must surely be a commissar or a commander. Uncle Jazi found that he looked like his son as he had seen him at Priska and Preza, but the man was speaking in a southern dialect like that of the partisan Baxhuli, and he assured himself he was not his son.

The commissar, or commander, that made no difference to uncle Jazi, was saying that the war against the Germans had entered into a particular phase, in which the people of Tirana would give another proof of their patriotism.

He mentioned some of the occasions of the past five and a half years on which the people of Tirana had shown courage and abnegation and gave the names of some of the victims who had fallen during the war, then he changed his tone and began to explain what was expected from everybody. These were things which Uncle Jazi was hearing for the first time. The commissar was speaking about raising barricades and digging trenches to prevent the German tanks from passing, about flour and other food materials to be stored for the liberated zone, measures for protection against any shelling as well as about arrangements for the treatment of the wounded and many other such things. In one word, they had to be prepared for a long battle which might last for several weeks and which, as the old man saw it, might reduce the town to ashes.

But the commander was speaking as though he was a hundred percent sure that the war would be over very soon and without much damage, it was not right to let the Germans go freely but that every effort should be made to hold them and either annihilate them or take them prisoners.

Uncle Jazi glanced at Baxhuli who was listening with his mouth open. Baxhuli once caught the old man's eye, gave him a wink and rubbed his hands. Uncle Jazi nodded as though he shared Baxhuli's feelings, but in his heart he was convinced that that war could not be over so soon.

He came up to Baxhuli and asked:

«Do you know who that commander is?»

«I know him. They call him Ferik and he is commanding a battalion of the brigade. He used to be a poor worker, but look at him now.»

The old man looked again at the commander and shook his head. When Ferik finished and invited his audience to give their opinion, Uncle Jazi was the first to raise his hand. He made some proposals which Ferik approved and wrote down in his notebook, then came over to the old man and patted him on the back: «You seem to be a man who has suffered much. Who knows in how many battles you have fought!».

A tall and morbidly thin young man, his partisan cap sitting loose on his shorn head, approached the commander and whispered something to him.

«Is that so?» he laughed gladly. «Very well.» Then he turned again to the old man and shook hands with him cordially.

«The uncle has a big defect,» said the thin man with his weak voice and stopping to take his breath. «He easily forgets his old friends.»

The feeling of proud joy that Uncle Jazi had felt after his talk with the commander vanished when he looked at the face of the young man. It was not the words of the young man that caused the change but

his sunken eyes, his cadaverous face and particularly his toneless voice which sounded as if it came from a grave. The old man tried to speak but his voice failed him, he remained staring fascinated and could only manage a mirthless smile.

«Don't you recognize me?» asked the young man showing a perfect set of white teeth, the only feature he had preserved from the beauty of his youth.

The old man shook his head.

«I don't know what to say, my son. It seems to me that I am still dreaming, and I don't trust my eyes... Could you be...»

He did not dare pronounce the name he had in his mind.

«Rexha. I am Rexha. Have you forgotten me so quickly?» said the young man holding out a bony hand.

The impulse of happiness, the words, everything seemed to be paralysed in uncle Jazi. You could not tell whether his joy was greater than his bitterness. He saw Rexha reduced to the shadow of his former self. But he was alive... alive!...

When he came out into the street, the old man looked quite another man both in his appearance and manner. He was walking between his two neighbours with a firm step towards his quarter where he had an important duty to accomplish.

### 3

All day long people never stopped coming out from their houses bringing all sorts of old furniture and other heavy objects to block the streets and passages that led to the large boulevard. Uncle Jazi with

his wife and the two children were the first to begin work at the barricade and gave a good example of high spirits and efficient endeavour to the others. They raised so strong a barricade, that when later a German tank tried to push through, it failed and had to return from where it had come.

The Germans opened fire with their machine guns in the evening and the partisans fired back. The battle had started, but the people, despite their inexperience, did not care to leave their places, and the streets remained full until late in the night.

Uncle Jazi's house was turned into headquarters of that particular partisan command which, as far as one could judge, was ordered to hold back the Germans from that part of the city, from the hospital to the boulevard, including the upper section of the boulevard. Judging from the fact that they had put a man like Ferik in command, the old man concluded that this sector of the town must be of particular importance to the partisans. So he was not surprised to see many of the communists he knew come to his house during the whole night from various parts of the town, report to the command, receive new orders and go out again. Among them he recognized Deko who, unlike the others, stayed most of the time with those of the command and came out only to transmit orders to the comrades waiting in the yard. Among the latter there was a young woman whom they called Netka. Uncle Jazi had not known her before and wondered at her eagerness to be sent to the places where the fighting seemed most dangerous. From time to time she caught Deko by the sleeve and repeated: «Why are you keeping me here, Deko? You must let me deal with Safet Backa; it is not a job for Drita,» or «You seem to be doing it on purpose, my boy. Why are you sending that comrade to my quarter when he does not know the place, while I live there and know all the nooks and corners of the place?» Deko was

trying to explain that this was a man's job and that it might be necessary to throw grenades at the German guards. «I also know how to throw a hand grenade, Deko, Bimi has taught me how to do it,» she insisted.

At last Deko sent her on a job that seemed risky, and the old man got frightened when he thought what might happen to her. He found a convenient moment and stopped Deko to ask him:

«Who is that woman, my boy? She is truly courageous!»

Deko, to whom Uncle Jazi appeared rather worried, tried to cheer him up with a joke.

«You have no business with her, uncle. She is married.»

«So she is, so she is», said the old man thoughtfully, then looked at the boy suspiciously. Was the young rascal serious or was he again making fun of him? «A fine moment for joking, to be sure,» he muttered through his teeth.

«I was not trying to be funny, uncle,» said Deko.

«No. You were in earnest, weren't you!» the old man was getting angry, but noticing the sparkling eyes of the fellow, he remembered something else and changed his tone... «Eh, Deko, Deko... I have met other devils like you in my lifetime... Did you know Piciruku?»

Deko felt embarrassed. A sudden pain went through his heart and he lowered his voice and said:

«You touched a painful sore, uncle. Piciruku was my teacher...»

He had not finished his words when he saw Netka coming very excited from the open door.

«Eh, Netka, is everything all right?» he asked stepping towards her.

«Well, I came to ask you to give me another job. There was nothing for me to do where you sent me,» she said out of breath. «Safet Bey is sending you his

best regards. He killed himself... As for his daughter...»

She saw that the boy was shaking his head and murmuring to himself, probably struck so much by Safet Bey's suicide that he was not paying attention to her following words, so she stopped short.

«What about the daughter?» asked Deko after a moment.

«She has been seen this morning crossing to the other side together with the Velo girl,» Netka continued, and I am afraid they are up to some mischief.»

Deko smiled.

«You think they may want to kill somebody?»

«Why not? They are desperate and their anger may drive them to attempt anything. They don't need to do the shooting themselves. They have enough gold and can hire somebody else to do it. There are a lot of thugs ready to do a thing like that if they are well paid for it. No, no, Deko. Don't take it so lightly. If you listen to me, you will let me take charge of this matter.»

Deko stepped back and looked at her with surprise and admiration. Nekiye Talo was no longer the timid and sentimental woman he had known some weeks before. And, what astonished him most, she was proving to be capable of very sound judgment, more sound than Deko himself, who had been her teacher.

«Do you intend to do away with them?» he asked smiling, but he meant it seriously.

«No, I swear I don't. I will never do anything against the orders of the Party. No, by no means! What I intend to do is to watch them closely, to see whom they meet, to find out what intentions they have and to keep you informed about everything. If I find it necessary, I may ask the comrades to arrest them, and then the people's tribunal will deal with them as it finds fit.»

Deko looked at her with open satisfaction.

«Brave, comrade Netka! I never thought you could see the question so clearly. Let it be as you say... Good luck!»

She disappeared among the people who were again flooding the street, while Deko turned once more to Uncle Jazi who was waiting anxiously in the yard. When the old man saw the young man's radiant eyes, he was reassured.

«Good news?» asked the old man rubbing his hands.

«Good news, uncle yes... For such good news many of our comrades gave their lives, even when some of them made some mistake.»

The old man was sad again. He knew that Deko had in mind P'ciruku's case.

«You haven't yet told me who that woman was,» the old man said to change the subject.

Deko pointed at the room where the partisans had set up their command.

«She is Ferik's wife. Didn't you hear him call her Nekije, which is her real name?»

## CHAPTER V

### 1

The battle for Tirana had been raging for several days with increasing intensity. The Germans had to

counter not only the partisan forces that had entered the eastern part of the town and were advancing house-to-house towards the center, but also the forces attacking their rear along a line extending from the Imperial Palace and the Durrës Street down to the Lapraka quarter. The pincer movement was closing on the Germans despite their stubborn resistance. The quisling and Ballist forces, routed in the battle with the partisans at Preza on the 20th of October, seemed to have vanished completely. Many of them had surrendered and others were giving themselves up daily; the others were retreating in separate bands towards Shkodra, where the regency council and the quisling government had set up their headquarters with the approval of the Germans under the pretext of reorganizing their resistance. They were followed closely by the leaders of the Balli Kombëtar and the Legality, who had brought with them all the belongings they could manage and were still hoping in an Anglo-American intervention.

The Germans had shut themselves in strong-points built on the central squares of the town, on the strategically important points and along the southern and south-western hills from where they could keep under control the Elbasan-Tirana road, from where they were expecting the divisions that had been dislocated from Greece. Their movements were limited to the three or four main streets always in tanks and armoured cars, from which they were firing continually with their machine-guns and light artillery at the liberated parts of Tirana.

And whenever the partisans attacked them in places where it seemed most unlikely, they resisted like mad.

Meanwhile the inhabitants of the occupied part of the capital, mostly old people, women and children, had taken refuge in cellars and air-raid covers.

A dark shadow had fallen over the house of the



Velos. Miss Edda, who had been a guest at that house for nearly two weeks, was waiting in vain to hear from her father. Mr. Backa had suddenly disappeared, and that was causing deep concern, particularly to Ajeta who was the head of the family. At first he thought that Mr. Backa could have crossed over to the liberated zone. Then it seemed more probable that he had joined the quislings to Shkodra, but soon it became clear that neither of these possibilities was true, they all had been suggested by Ajeta to himself to tranquilize his guest. As a matter of fact, he had learned that an SS-patrol had gone to look for Mr. Backa at his house, but had found only the old man-servant weeping for his master. The Germans had tried to make him tell where his master was, but when the man had refused to open his mouth despite their threats and blows, they had shot him on the spot and had gone away.

Miss Edda, who had finally heard all these things, realized what dangers were hanging over father's head, as well as over hers, and was trying to persuade herself that her father had succeeded in avoiding the danger and was still safe. She was inclined to believe that Mr. Backa, although his relations with the communists were of a complicated and uncertain nature, had preferred to go over to their side, so she asked Ajeta:

«What do you say, Mr. Ajeta, wouldn't it be better for us to go over to that side too? I am all alone now except for my father and God.»

Ajeta, who wished to get rid of her as soon as possible, tried to explain to her that the «other side» might well be safe, for her but not for him and his family.

«First of all it will be difficult to find accommodation for all of us. Then my presence in the liberated zone will certainly be interpreted as an attempt to undermine the morale of the population: and that could have serious consequences.»

«Don't you think the same applies to my father?» asked the girl.

«Well, the case of your father is quite different. He is a personality and, although he may have some enemies, his friends are more powerful. Besides, his running away to the partisans may be linked with certain conditions. Yes, that must be the case, most certainly... Safet Bey is a deep one.»

Mrs. Naime, who divined by intuition the difficult position of her son and her family, tried to put in a word of her own.

«And Hajdar Bey, my son, haven't you thought of Hajdar Bey? He himself told me Ajeta can come to me for any help you may need. Hajdar Bey is a good man and he doesn't forget his friends even though we...»

«Leave him alone, mother,» said Emira irritated. «Hajdar Bey is in deep water.»

«He has other problems to attend to now,» said Ajeta gravely and explained that in Shkodra, which had become a center of the nationalists, they were expecting great things from Hajdar Bey.

Emira screwed up her mouth and said nothing. She had long ago seen the smoke coming from the new nationalist stronghold and was seriously worried over the «unfortunate end of Mithat Bey's cause» when, at the farewell meeting organized by the «head of Albanian nationalism», Mithat Bey was giving his last instructions to those who remained behind. The girl had been disappointed that Mithat Bey had gone so far as to ask the opinion of an old fool like Hajdar Bey and to rely on him for the future destiny of the nation.

Only the possibility of an intervention on the part of the British and Americans kept alive Emira's hopes; they surely could not allow the Communist Party of Albania to continue the work of «Red Russia» in the Balkans. That was what B. B. C. maintained in its

broadcasts in Albanian in which it never ceased praising the Balli and the Legality. That also emerged from the underground activity of the British and American military missions in Albania and more particularly from the presence, with the German approval, of Colonel Maclean at the meeting of the nationalists in Preza. «But what will become of us until the British and Americans make up their mind?» the girl asked herself bitterly.

Afiz Turhani had proved the cleverest of all in that sense, because he still maintained his relations with the communists, and Emira, who had once despised him for his ignorance, had changed her attitude to the old bearded man.

Emira kept all these reflections and hopes to herself and did not confide them to her brother, who lately was showing signs of not being in his right mind and whose conversation was too often incoherent. She had noticed it particularly after his miraculous escape from the battle of Preza which, according to Emira, had a deteriorating affect on his thinking capacity. Ajë had gone to the castle of Preza on another business and had found himself unwillingly involved in the battle. He had been invited to an enlarged meeting of the leaders of all the anti-communist parties and groups which was to be held in the castle under the chairmanship of Mithat Frashëri and in the presence of Colonel Maclean, the head of the British military mission. The meeting had actually taken place. It had even adopted some resolutions of «capital importance», as Ajë frequently repeated whenever he was given an opportunity. They had also invited to the meeting the notorious chieftain of Mirdita, Gjon Marka Gjoni, which had been considered a significant step towards unification, since it was the first time that he was sending a representative of his own to reach an agreement with the other nationalist groups and parties.

Eqrem Banka also had been at that meeting toge-

ther with Ajeta and said he had gone just to please Major Ficht. At least that was how Mr. Banka himself explained his presence, but there were others who thought they knew everything and they made a lot of comments on that when speaking to each other in undertones.

«Major Ficht must have obliged him, at gun point, else Mr. Banka would not have come,» insinuated ironically some of them.

«At gun point? Eqrem Banka needed no gun to be persuaded to go. I rather think that Frau Tefta has whispered a word to Major Ficht and that had been sufficient.»

«That is true, by God!...»

Ajeta was not aware of these rumours. He kept all the time by the side of Mr. Banka and, whenever he had a chance, engaged his friend in intimate conversation. He was impressed by the construction of the castle in which the meeting was held. It was an impregnable fortress. Apart from its naturally protected position, the castle had been strongly fortified by the Germans, and Ajeta compared it with Verdun. He thought that by choosing such a place for their meeting, Mithat Bey had given proof of high strategic capabilities. Ajeta had confided his impressions on that «Albanian Verdun» to Mr. Banka, adding that even if worse came to worse and Albania was turned upside down, this was a place where they could feel safe.

«It is a fine thing, Eqrem, isn't it?... To be invited to a meeting of such historical significance, and at the same time so dangerous, and to be certain that nothing can touch you,» he whispered on the following day when they were getting ready to leave for home.

«Fine, yes, I agree with you. But on one condition,» replied Mr. Banka with little enthusiasm.

«What condition?»

«That in the end we should win. Or it would amount to nothing.»

«Yes, yes. But we are sure to win. I was greatly encouraged by Mithat Bey's words yesterday.»

Eqrem Banka, who could see the situation more clearly than Ajeta, looked at his friend with a whimsical smile, lighted a cigarette and said:

«So it be, my dear...»

At that moment they heard volleys of shots coming from different directions. At first they were inclined to laugh at the partisan's madness but when they saw the German soldiers use in vain their weapons and at last ask the nationalist chiefs to give them a hand in the counterattack, Ajeta and Banka looked at each other alarmed.

The two friends were also asked to take part in the fight. Mr. Banka tried to explain in his broken German that since they were intellectuals they did not know how to use a gun and might be a hindrance to the others, but the Germans would not listen and pointed their automatics at them, too.

Ajeta Velo had lost his head from the very first moment.

When Mr. Banka was wounded and cried for help, Ajeta had raised his hand to protect his own head and had run like mad.

Later he tried to describe the event in a way to conceal the truth and to present his role in a better light, but the circumstances of the battle and his own contradictions betrayed him.

The truth was that when he heard his friend cry for help he dropped his rifle and raised his hands to give himself up but as he saw nobody around, neither enemy nor friend, he ran as fast as he could in the direction of Tirana. He could not explain how he had escaped unhurt and even if he had told the truth as it was, nobody would believe him.

Only his sister, who knew his weaknesses, saw clearly what had happened and advised him not to talk to anybody about it.

«How easily you get frightened, you women!» Ajet said instead of taking her advice. «We men are different,» he continued shaking a threatening fist at nothing in particular: «We look danger straight in the eyes and act...»

A minute later he was more conciliatory:

«My dear sister, do you realize that your brother is in real danger? At any moment, just as we are sitting here, a man may come, one of Qemal Orhanaj's comrades, pointing his gun at me and ask: 'Are you Ajet Velo?' 'Yes,' I shall answer, my honour does not allow me to deny it. Then he will put a bullet through my head, and it will be all over with Ajet Velo... Besides, Major Ficht may hear how I escaped from Preza, and that would be awful, awful...»

He stood for a moment in an attitude of heroic martyrdom, while his sister was holding back her tears with difficulty, then found it necessary to give her courage:

«I am talking nonsense... Everything will be all right... Shkodra will see to it... Eh, I should have listened to Mithat Bey and should have gone with him to Shkodra...»

Emira was relieved when she saw him engage in a more reasonable conversation with Edda. It meant that he was recovering from the crisis of Preza and was returning to a more normal state of mind. «Oh God!» she sighed. «Do not let him lose his head. As for the rest, he will manage it in some ways». She gave a long kind look to her brother. She did not like what he said a minute before about expecting great things from Hajdar Bey at this critical moment, but she did not want to irritate her brother and preferred to keep quiet.

In the evening two German armoured cars took position in front of the Velo house and fired throughout the night at the attacking partisans. By dawn they withdrew, and the place was occupied temporarily by partisan forces. But the partisans also did not stay long: they only controlled a few houses and withdrew quietly.

Ajet, frightened by that incident, found it advisable to stay away from home for a certain time, leaving his mother, his sister and their guest alone in the house. He did not tell them where he was going but only assured them that they had nothing to fear and, if anything should happen, he would come himself or send word to them as to what they should do. For a whole day and a night they had no word from him and began to worry. Mrs. Naime went several times to the street door and came back murmuring to herself. 'My son, my son, why did you go away like this and leave us without a man in the house?' When their neighbour Adivia told them in a roundabout way that someone like Ajet had been arrested in the «other part» of Tirana, the old woman received a stroke which paralysed half of her body and she was unable to cry or stand any more on her feet, but had to stay motionless in bed.

Emira had never before found herself in such a difficult situation. She felt sorry for mother and tried to make her as comfortable as she could, but she had no experience in medical assistance and could find no doctor. But most of all she was worried about her brother. She decided that she had to go over to the liberated zone and try to find out what had happened to him, to find somebody to whom she could speak, whom she could ask... «Somebody,» she repeated but had no courage to ask herself who that somebody could

be, and what she could ask him. For the moment she was thinking only of finding a way to cross to the other side before it was too late. It was not easy. She had some of her mother relations there, and they could take her in for a few days. But how was she going to cross the line? Fighting had been going on for several days along a line stretching from the Elbasan road down to the opposite end of the town, to the end of the boulevard. Throughout the night Tirana was illuminated by the fire of the burning houses and shops on the «28th November» Street and the Old Market, the fire as well as the fighting were increasing in intensity every day, every hour. Nobody could tell what might happen tomorrow or the day after! Adivia, the neighbour who had once been so unhappy but at last had succeeded in breaking the chains of slavery under which her father was holding her and had joined the Movement, had raised Emira's hopes that she could arrange her passage to the liberated zone together with her frivolous companion Eda. Emira trusted the girl. But would she be able to overcome all the obstacles? It seemed extremely difficult.

Emira had not been able to sleep that night. Early in the morning Adivia came to her smiling.

«Are you ready to go?» she asked directly.

«Where!»

«To the liberated zone, as we spoke yesterday.»

Emira could not believe it was true.

«When? How?»

«Right now... I have found a reliable man who will show you the way.»

All the dark thoughts and worries of the night were lifted from Emira like by magic, her face brightened and she threw her arms round the girl.

She asked Adivia to take a look every now and then after her mother, then she arranged her hair, put on a pullover, a grey linen skirt and a light coat, and taking Eda with her went out.



The man who was going to accompany them did not look as reliable as Adivia had described him, and Emira had the impression that he was not worth much as a guide, but she had no choice and had to accept him.

The man, who in stature and appearance looked little more than a boy, did not seem reassuring. His face, marked by smallpox, scowled and twisted in an ugly grimace every time he spoke (he did not open his mouth more than two or three times). Only when he took them safe to the other side and took his leave from them, Emira changed her opinion and decided that he was born for such difficult enterprises, «the clever rascal» she said to herself.

Trembling with fear, with hearts palpitating like a small bird in the hand of a child, the two girls followed their guide through some narrow passages, across a garden and over a crumbling wall and found themselves at the end of the boulevard where a high barricade had been raised to protect the partisans from the machine-guns of the German bunker on the square before the town hall.

Emira took courage when she saw other people, among them a woman with a child in her arms, who crossed the boulevard stooping behind the barricade, while the German machine-gun continued to fire.

The boy, pausing for a moment, perhaps to allow the others to pass, heard the roar of a tank directed towards the barricade and motioned to the girls to run after him. Emira caught the confused Edda by the hand and ran. As soon as they reached the opposite sidewalk of the boulevard, a squad of partisans appeared from somewhere and took positions behind the barricade. The tank was now so near that it appeared to have butted against the barricade and was trying to go through it. The pavement of the boulevard and the walls of the nearby houses vibrated under its throbbing roar.

«Fire!» came a command amidst the deafening noise; it was a high-pitched call, long and piercing, coming from a point which Emira could not determine.

Two partisans sprang to their feet from their positions behind the barricade, swung their hands backwards and with the swiftness of lightning launched something at the tank.

The explosion that followed was louder than the roar of the tank, which changed gear and began to pull back enveloped in flames and whining like a wounded beast.

«That was that!» cried the «clever rascal», smiling for the first time since he had taken charge of the girls.

«Now,» he continued, «you can go wherever you please. Here we are in «Free Albania», but you should beware of some mortar shell launched at random by the German «rascals». Keep close to the left walls of the streets until you reach the hospital street by the Medresse. There you will find as many people as you like and they will help you to find what you are looking for.

He saluted them with his raised fist and took to the right along the walls of some crumbling houses.

The two girls followed him with their eyes but neither of them remembered to say a word of thanks.

For a while they remained silent. The street was deserted and no sign of life came from the closed windows and doors of the houses. «What can that mean?» said Emira to herself. «Can we have fallen from the frying pan into the fire?» She hesitated for a moment and even felt an impulse to turn back, but she did not dare share her fears with her companion and walked on with her eyes on the ground, while Eda could not refrain from looking to the right and to the left, though she, too, was frightened by the silence.

«Look at them. They may start fighting right here. Hurry up,» she said nudging Emira.

Emira glanced in the direction indicated by Eda. Behind the walls and chimneys of the houses she saw the figures of partisans standing in positions of watchful expectation. They stood absolutely still, like stone statues, but it was evident that they were expecting something to happen at any moment.

«Let us go along,» said Emira taking her friend by the arm.

A little further the aspect of the street began to change. People appeared in the street, the doors of the houses were open, partisans came and went exchanging a few words with the owners of the houses or asking for some help when they needed it.

Emira saw an old woman, all in black, offering something to a group of partisans, which they refused to take.

«I have made a pledge, Bimi, please, take them. Don't break my heart.»

Bimi laughed and tried to explain:

«Can't you see mother of Kopani, we are going on business? We may never come back. Why should we waste your fine flanneles?»

Mother Sadete stepped back in dismay.

«Don't my son. Don't say such horrible words.»

At that moment, explosions of grenades and shots of automatic-rifles came from the positions of the partisans near the boulevard.

«It is starting,» shouted Bimi cheerfully and ran with his comrades towards the noise. The firing increased and within two minutes all that part of the town was deafened by the noise of all sorts of arms among which could be distinguished the roar and whine of tanks and armored cars thundering up and down the boulevard.

The two girls quickened their pace among the crowds of people pouring into the street.

From the Medresse up, it was a different world. The noises of the battle on the boulevard came muffled and the people did not seem to be particularly concerned about them. The Bardhyl Street was like a public promenade. Many of the young people were wearing partisan uniforms and quite a few of them were girls.

Eda saw one of the girls and drew Emira's attention to her.

«Look how ugly she is. I have never seen anything like her.»

Emira nudged her with her elbow.

«Will you shut up, or do you want to bring trouble to us?» she whispered. Her headache had returned and she felt heat in her body which made her feel uncomfortable.

Trying to avoid the eyes of the people who were looking at them with curiosity, they reached a big building in which the garrison had set up its command; a partisan was on guard at its door.

«This must be the building they told us about,» said Emira in an undertone and without looking at it.

«Most probably,» said Eda.

Neither of them was inclined to ask the guard. Even if they did, what could he tell them? They did not know what to ask him. Then he might ask them the reason of their visit. Only now Emira began to realize the difficulty of their task. Eda did not seem much concerned.

«What does it matter,» she said twisting her mouth. «We can say we want to see their chief. He must know everything and will be able to give us some information. Then...» she looked at Emira coquettishly and whispered: «We are girls... quite attractive. There is

no reason why he should not be pleased to see us. What do you say?»

Emira was fixing with her eyes a button on her friend's blouse under which an uncovered part of her breast was visible. She shook her head thoughtfully and replied.

«Are you prepared to go as far as that?... And you call yourself the daughter of Safet bey Backa!»

She walked on holding her hand on her burning forehead.

Eda followed her repentantly:

«Wait, Emira, wait. I was only joking, by my word.»

They walked quickly for a while, but Emira could not get rid of her irritation. She was searching among the people some acquaintance, someone of those who had honoured her when she was in good terms with Qemal Orhanaj. She remembered that it was quite a long time since she had seen «Demko», then she thought of the girl with the beautiful name «Arta», of her miraculous escape from the Gestapo prison, then of a number of others whom she had known at that time. She feared that even if she met them, they would give her a cold shoulder, but still she wanted to meet someone of them.

Later, when they had gone a long way without meeting anybody, she thought she should go to her mother's relations and ask their advice, after which she could address herself directly to the «authorities». She pronounced the word with contempt and fear. Then she remembered that her mother's people had also been involved with the Balli and, in the present situation, must have enough troubles of their own. Then she decided to return once more to the Command of the division and linger around with the hope of finding someone she knew among those who went there or came out.

Eda, afraid to irritate her, followed her quietly. As

they reached the street that cut by half the quarter and ended at the Bardhyl Street, they saw a group of people coming in their direction. From time to time someone shouted «Make way!». But while the people in the street drew aside to let the group pass, others came out from the houses driven by curiosity and again obstructed the street. Again the same voice shouted «Make way, comrades!» and Eda recognized in it, then in the face, the young man who had accompanied them earlier. She turned to Emira, who was looking in the same direction.

«Look there», Eda cried. «It is the 'clever rascal' who helped us to cross the boulevard. Don't you see him?»

Emira only pursed her lips and said nothing.

The group formed a long column walking in silence and with their heads low. They were flanked by four partisans holding their automatic-rifles ready.

At the head of the column and a few paces in front of it was coming the «clever rascal». He was wearing a partisan cap with the red star which gave him a new appearance. He was marching with an air of proud satisfaction, holding a rifle under his left arm and waving with his right hand to the people in the street to keep out of his way.

Suddenly Emira cried out and covered her eyes with her hand. She had seen in the middle of the column Ajeta Velo looking right and left as if searching for somebody. His unshaven face, hardly distinguishable under the hat pulled low over his eyes, had the look of a man who had lost all hope. He raised his right hand to his throat, loosened his necktie and unbuttoned his shirt down to the belt of his trousers. Then he buttoned up his shirt again and tightened his necktie. A little farther down the column the girl recognized the swollen face of a Ballist officer with his uniform torn and stained. It was Rait Mata; he was holding his head bent down as if to hide his face from

the eyes of the people and was dragging his feet with difficulty.

«Where are they taking them? They are going to shoot them!» cried Emira, unable to control herself. Then she pushed aside Eda and hurried through the crowd that was following the column.

4

«What was the matter with that girl?» asked Father Llani who had just come from his village with a letter for the Command of the Division. The Philosopher, who had met him a little earlier, had accompanied him to the Command. He was wearing an old partisan uniform, which Drita's mother had adjusted somehow to fit his little body, and was now showing off proudly. His comrades envied him as much for the important task he was asked to carry out as for his uniform.

«They say they have arrested her brother,» said a woman.

Father Llani looked at her with interest.

«Could they have arrested him if he has done nothing wrong? I should not believe it,» he said.

Neither do I, said the woman.

«That was a funny question to ask,» intervened the Philosopher gravely. «These were all Ballists, they have all done wrong.»

The old man raised his head and shifted his eyes with curiosity from the woman to the boy and back again.

«Don't you know her?» asked the boy. «This is my mother. She always remembers the cherries you

brought us and reproches me for not returning the basket.»

Father Llani took her hand in both his hands and shook it heartily.

«The basket! You ought to be ashamed to mention it. Your Father Llani is ready to give his life for a boy like your captain here. His life...»

\*  
\*   \*  
\*

Emira Velo, who had at last been reassured that the arrested men were not being led to execution but to a political lecture to be given by a commissar in a hall of the hospital, had come back to her friend and was listening to the comments the people were making on the event.

With her eyes on Eda but her attention to what was being said, she caught almost every word between the old man and the woman, and hated the boy, «that urchin», for his remark on the arrested men. «The communists have sown hatred and intransigence even in the hearts of their children,» she thought to herself.

«Do you remember having seen that woman,» asked Eda, whose thoughts and feelings had been distracted. In an indirect way she had tried to inquire about her father, the people she had approached had shrugged their shoulders and drawn away from her, so she did not dare attempt any more questions. She had even stopped annoying Emira with her foolish questions and remarks.

«No, I have never seen her,» said Emira curtly.

«But I know her well,» said Eda with malicious provocation, «she has been a servant at our house.»

Emira stared at her open-eyed.

«Why should you be surprised?» Eda asked. «It was you who recommended her to my father. That was about six months ago.»



Emira's face darkened. She closed her eyes and tried to remember the circumstances. «Demko,» she muttered with bitterness. «That little serpent!»

More people had gathered around the old man. A woman of about forty, tall and with a big round face, wearing a partisan uniform and the Red Cross band of a nurse on her arm, was talking about a wounded partisan who had been brought to the hospital from the front. She mentioned his name, Bimi, which Emira had already heard that morning when they were in the first street of the quarter controlled by the partisans. The nurse was saying that his wound was serious and that everybody had felt terribly sorry about what had happened, particularly Zef Moisiu who, despite the urgent duties he had to attend to, had stayed a whole hour by the boy's bed and had quarrelled with the doctors. For one doctor, who had failed to stop in time the hemorrhage, Zef had demanded to be brought before the court-martial for sabotage: «And he will find it hard to justify himself if Zef accuses him. He is irremovable once he has made up his mind in affairs like this,» concluded the nurse.

«Zef Moisiu? Who knows what a blackguard he is,» said Emira to herself and looked at Eda, who was watching the scene indifferently.

«You have lost your spirit, my girl. We shall have to move from this place, otherwise...»

At that moment the nurse took her leave from the others and was coming towards the two girls. She stopped before Emira and asked her:

«And you, what made you come to this part of the town?»

Emira lowered her eyes and tried to smile, pretending that she was not giving too much importance to what she was going to say:

«I? Well, I came to clear up a misunderstanding... They have arrested my brother...»

«Mr. Ajet?»

«Yes. Do you know him?» Emira said surprised.  
«Yes, I do. I have had the occasion to know him some time ago.»

The nurse was keeping her eyes a little to one side and seemed to be reflecting. Someone greeted the nurse from a distance, calling her by her name and Emira learned that her name was Evgjenia.

«I shall tell you whom you must see about it,» said the nurse.

«Whom?» asked Emira.

«Zef Moisiu.»

Evgjenia did not notice the change that came over Emira's face and continued:

«Yes, Zef is the responsible of the Party here. He is well informed and will be able to put the thing right.»

«I don't know him,» sighed Emira with an effort to dissimulate her apprehension.

«You will know him as soon as you see him,» Evgjenia encouraged her. «He is the only one among the armymen who wears civilian clothes and an ordinary civilian cap to match the colour of his suit, instead of the partisan cap with the red star.

## 5

It was getting dark. People were coming and going before the building of the Command.

«I have a bad presentiment,» whispered Eda.

«You, with your presentiments!» said Emira impatiently, but she noticed that for the first time her frivolous friend seemed seriously worried.

«I don't know what it is, but I feel in my heart that my father has also been arrested.»

«Nonsense! You don't know what you are talking about,» Emira scolded her. «Safet Bey is not easy to catch in a trap. Didn't you hear what Ajeta said about his position? If nobody has seen him here, it means that he has gone to Shkodra where neither the partisans nor the Germans can lay hands on him.

These words were enough to cheer Eda up; she wiped the tears from her eyes, her face brightened, and Emira was afraid that she would begin again her usual frivolous talk.

«Let us walk a little this way, come what may...»

They walked for a while arm-in-arm in the darkness. Emira turned her head from time to time to look back towards the building of the Command which she could not put out of her mind.

«What if I suddenly meet Ismail? What should I do?» asked Eda unexpectedly.

Emira gave her a sarcastic smile:

«You will throw yourself in his arms, of course... He will press you to his heart and kiss you; and you will melt away like a candle in his warm embrace and will have no breath left to say good-bey to me, you sister.»

«You are making fun of me,» said Eda crossly.

«No, I am not. I am quite serious. But you must not forget that your Ismail is a serpent with two heads, and you can't expect any good from a serpent.»

«Ismail...» murmured Eda dreamily. «I don't believe all the things people say about him.»

They walked to the place where Bardhyl Street crosses the street of the hospital. Emira, whose thoughts had remained with the Command building, proposed that they should return.

«I am so fond of walking,» said Eda. «I should like to walk on over those fields and hills... as far as my eyes can see... Ugh?! This life is so boring!»

But all the same she followed Emira.

A little before they arrived at the gate of the Command, down where the noise of the battle has been going on continuously, but nobody seemed to mind it any more, they were startled by a huge red light which suddenly flashed and flooded the whole town and reddened its surrounding hills, after it followed the combined noise of artillery fire, machine-guns and ordinary rifle shots which continued for several minutes. The mountains behind Tirana, from Kruja down to the Erzen River, were echoing the noise so clearly that the people were not certain from where it was coming and were turning their heads from one side to the other.

The girls looked at each other frightened. Other people too, were holding their steps and turning their attention towards the noise. The windows, doors and balconies were crowded with people anxious to see what was going on.

«The Old Market is on fire!» cried someone from the roof of a house. «The top of the minaret has gone.»

«My goodness!» cried a woman. «My Miti is there, Miti... They sent him to take photos of the battle.»

«Which Miti?» asked someone from the crowd. «I just parted with him. I left him at the propaganda office of the division. He was swaggering with a camera slung over his shoulder like one of the English mission.»

The woman looked at him with suspicion.

«Are you sure of what you are saying?» she asked anxiously.

«Of course. Miti is a friend of mine. We work together.»

A crowd had gathered around them. Emira had recognized the woman. She was Agllai, Tefta's mother. Tefta was the wife of the late Mr. Banka who had died a tragic death at Preza. It was said that of late Tefta had completely abandoned her husband and was staying with some German officers. «While her mother

is no less than an ardent communist. Funny how things get mixed up,» concluded Emira.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a partisan squad which appeared from a side-street, passed them running and proceeded down the street towards the battle-field. Two other squads came from behind the building of the Command and hurried down the Bardhyl Street; they were still putting in order their equipment and uniforms and seemed to have just been awakened from sleep.

«Quick, comrades.» incited them their excited responsables.

«There is something going on with these fellows...» thought Emira, and a hope mixed with fear flashed through her mind: «What would happen if the Germans overran the quarter and set fire to every one of its houses...?»

The street was crowded with more people. They were whispering to each other excitedly and could not stay in one place. Emira saw the nurse talking to the guard of the Command; the guard was answering politely, but was not letting her in. Then a boy and a girl addressed the guard, both dressed in partisan uniforms and standing so close together that they must have been engaged to be married. In his voice and his gestures the boy reminded Emira of Demko and she felt a knot in her throat. But when she looked at the boy, who ran up the stairs holding the girl by the hand, she saw that he was not her former little friend.

«What frightened them?» asked Eda pointing at the crowd which was disappearing in different directions. Some of the people were running down the narrow street towards the center, from where was coming, at first muffled, then more distinctly, the rumble of an advancing tank. The people had disappeared from the doors and windows which were being locked and shuttered.

«Let us go away, we must not be caught here,» said Eda breathlessly.

Emira did not seem to hear her. It seemed she had not heard Eda talking to her and the people running, or the tank approaching. She was lost in her thoughts. «This is queer! These of the Command don't seem to bother... He must be terrible, indeed, that responsible of the Party to whom that nurse advised me to go... How did she say?... «You can't make him change his decision once he has made up his mind.» or something of that kind. And she said he was well informed about everything... Would that Zef Moisiu be also as well, informed about Ajeta, the blackguard?

«Let us get away, Emira, can't you see what is going on?», repeated Eda, pulling her friend by the arm.

«Where can we go?»

«No matter where, only away from here...»

Two explosions, almost simultaneous, came from the far end of the street and shook the air. Eda jumped, dropped her friend's hand and ran to the yard of the house on the other side of the street which had its door half-open. Emira followed her.

A relative silence fell after the explosions. Even the noise of the battle that had been shaking Tirana until a minute before sounded attenuated like the rustling of water after a downpour of rain.

People appeared once more in the street, but the two girls did not dare come out. They stood behind the wall of the yard which was low enough to permit them to watch unseen that was going on in the street and in front of the building of the Command.

The partisan on guard at the door of the building seemed a queer fellow. He would let some of the visitors enter without a question, while he stopped the others, asked them interminable questions and mostly refused to let them in. With some of them he permitted himself to joke, talking to them with his

thick Labëria accent which one could hardly understand.

«Hey, uncle! Who told you you could enter here without permission like in your own house?» he shouted to an old man, showing no respect for his age.

The old man looked up in surprise.

«Are you in earnest, Babush?» he asked,

«Of course I am. Do you think they have put me here to frighten the chickens?»

«That is a funny fellow,» whispered Emira to Eda. They expected the two men to start a quarrel.

But the old man did not insist. He drew aside to let two other men pass and stood there as if waiting his turn.

«Are you convinced now that I am the king here,» the guard teased him.

«Yes, I am, I am. But look here,» the old man took a tobacco box from the pocket of his old military coat that came almost to his ankles, opened it, shook it under the eyes of the guard to show that it was empty and continued: «give me first a pinch of your tobacco to roll a cigarette because I haven't had a smoke for hours, then I will show you something.»

«I am on duty, uncle, I won't be scolded for your sake.»

«I also am on duty, you quarrelsome Tosk. How dare you use that tone with uncle Jazi? Do you know that I was almost crushed to death by that tank which had pushed through the barricade and was coming this way?... But it found its match...» Uncle Jazi thumped his chest with his fist. «And now you are strutting before me like a rooster on a dunghill.»

«Whom do you want to see?» asked the guard in a more conciliatory tone.

— You know very well whom I want to see. But first give me a little of your tobacco.»

«Comrade Zef?» asked Baxhuli in an undertone, offering the old man his tobacco pouch.

«Him, of course.»

«Aha. He can't be disturbed. Ask me to find you anyone else of the command, but not Comrade Zef. He is particularly busy tonight.»

Uncle Jazi rolled deftly a cigarette, pulled it avidly once or twice and blew the smoke from his mouth and nostrils.

«My business is with him, Babush, and it can't wait. Only he can see it through properly.»

«Only he... Of course...» Baxhuli shook his head regretfully. «But I can do nothing for you. I can't disturb him now.

«You will disturb him, for my sake,» pleaded the old man.

«No, no, no... I can't do it, by my ideal... Nobody dare disturb him when he is at a meeting... Tonight he is all nerves. There must be a special reason for it, usually he does not get like that for nothing... As for you, uncle, you'd better wait here until the meeting is over and then speak to him yourself. He must come out sooner or later.»

The old man insisted no more. He pulled two or three draughts from his cigarette and drew aside, dragging his tired feet. The two girls lowered their heads to avoid his eyes. Emira was holding her breath and making signs to Eda to be quiet. Eda was surprised to see her so agitated.

When the old man was out of sight in the street flanking the building of the Command, Eda took courage to whisper:

«There is no danger now. Why are you so frightened.»

«I am not frightened, but I feel cold.»

«Is that why you tremble? Why didn't you say so? Here, take my coat, it is thicker than your gabardine .

«Sh-sh!» whispered Emira. «Someone is coming.»



A patrol of two partisans walked through the street before them and was lost towards the Bami Street.

«Now we are in a real trouble,» whispered Emira again. «We shall have to pass the whole night here.»

«But why.»

«Because if we come out the patrol will arrest us.»

«Let us knock at this door,» proposed Eda pointing at the house behind them.

«By no means! What are you talking about? Do you want to give the alarm and raise the whole town? ... Besides, this house is empty. No sound has come from it for the last hour.»

They stood close to each other huddled against the wall. After a while Eda fell into a light doze, while Emira, her eyes wide open, kept on watching the stairs at the entrance of the Command building which were illuminated by a small electric lamp capped by a cardboard shade. She wanted to see what time it was but could not read the hours on her watch. Then she thought she should be able to hear the town clock striking the hours, but it was also impossible. It was true that the noise of the fighting had died down and the isolated shots or the rare spurts to machine-gun fire and the crackling of the burning shops at the Old Market were not loud enough to drown the clear notes of the clock, but they never came.

From time to time she could hear the firm steps of a patrol approaching or the rhythmic marching of a group of partisans coming from the hospital or the opposite direction. She could also hear vague noises coming from the other streets and passages, movements of army men or civilian inhabitants of the quarter, and that gave her hope that the night would soon be over.

She wanted very much to see what time it was on her watch. She strained her eyes, but it was useless. The corner where she and Eda were hiding was very dark. Then she saw that the rays of the moon were filtering through the branches of the trees throwing

white patches on the ground. She disengaged herself carefully from Eda, crawled on her hands and knees to one of those patches and saw that it was four o'clock.

Then she returned to her corner and began to think how to tackle the terrible Zef Moisiu, who even if he were a king, should be more aboardable to the people. The words exchanged between the guard and the old man made him appear even more unapproachable to Emira. Why had that nurse recommended him to her? Could she have done it with some bad intention? «That would be fine on her part,» thought Emira, «but I am Emira Velo and I won't stand it without giving as much as I take.»

Then her thoughts wandered to poor Ajeta locked in some cellar full of moisture together with the others, «he who is so fastidious and can't stand even the smoke of a candle in his bedroom when the electric light fails.» Then she thought of her mother, poor Mrs. Naima, all alone and submitted to all these inconveniences at her age. «Perhaps she is struggling with death now, with nobody to come to her aid.»

She drew a deep breath and leaned her head against the cold bricks of the wall.

When she opened her eyes, the sky was growing pale and the stars were fading. Muffled noises from the neighbouring houses and streets showed that the town was coming to life again.

«It is dawn,» she murmured and began to shake gently Eda, who awoke with a start.

The Bardhyl Street was again alive, and people began to gather round the guard at the door of the Command building. In the yard of the building and in the narrow street on its right appeared some partisans. Some of them were returning exhausted from the battlefield, others had just been awakened and were getting ready to go. Some rare civilians were exchanging a word with those returning from the front, asking them about some acquaintance, and when the answer

was satisfactory, repeating happily: «Thank you, you have lifted a big weight off my chest.»

The guard was the same of the night before, the funny man whom people addressed as «Babush» or «Baxhuli». His eyes were red from lack of sleep but he was not complaining. He was carrying on with his duty just as he had done the previous day, joking, threatening or respectful, according to the visits or to his mood of the moment. She could not like him but she felt sorry for him. He had passed the whole night without sleep and nobody had come to relieve him. «But who knows what his plight can be,» Emira said to herself. «He certainly needs sleep but may be he can't protest because he might risk a heavy punishment.» Again her thoughts returned to that «blackguard» Zef Moisiu, who was still at that meeting of his as if on that meeting depended the fate of the world.

«Are we going to stay here much longer?» asked Eda, her face swollen and her body shivering. «I am freezing. Can't you see?»

She was in a bad state indeed. Her cheeks were blue and she was trembling like a reed in the wind.

«Let us get out of here,» Emira consented.

They shook the dust and dry leaves from their skirts, wiped their eyes with their handkerchiefs, put in some order their hair with a comb that Eda found in the pocket of her coat and stole cautiously out through a breach in the wall that led to a side-street to their left. From there they came out into the Bardhul Street and began to walk aimlessly, keeping in sight the building of the Command. Emira was turning to look it so frequently that Eda, who was not much interested in it, asked her with some irritation.

«Why are you looking all the time that way?»

«I want to speak to the guard.»

«What for?»

«I want to ask him a favour.»

«A favour from that fool?»

Emira laughed uncomfortably.

«No, my dear. I have no direct business with the guard, but I want to ask him about that other fellow, who they say has in hand the whole situation here. He has been at a meeting all night long and is due to come out soon.»

«Well, let us go to him, why should we wait any longer? We are sure to meet him. You can ask about my father, too...»

«Of course, about your father too,» sighed Emira and walked resolutely towards the guard.

Baxhuli had just finished bickering with a grain merchant who wanted to complain directly to the «big ones of the partisans» for twenty eight quintals and eleven kilos of flour that had been sequestered. The guard had sent off the merchant and was now pacing nervously up and down before the door. He gave the girls a sidelong look, heard with his forehead creased the few timid words that Emira said to him then looked away without giving her an answer. Emira saw the disdainful look in his eyes and withdrew muttering indignantly something to herself.

«We shall have to wait,» said Eda. «We have no choice.»

Baxhuli continued for some time to fume and swear at that «damn bourgeois who hadn't been able to sleep all night because of a few sacks of flour at a time when others are bargaining with death... And the bastard wanted to complain to the big ones of the partisans,» the guard shook his head in disgust, «no less than say Comrade Vjosa and Comrade Besnik! Eh, I should have let him in and let him get what the turtle got when she went to the blacksmith to be shod...»

So comical were the words and manner of the guard that the girls would have laughed aloud but for a group of people that were coming towards them. The girls stepped aside to let them pass.

At the head of the group was a man of about sixty, walking on crutches; he was neatly dressed and cleanly shaven. Emira was sure that she had seen him before but could not remember who he was. She saw by his side the little «urchin» in partisan uniform who the day before had rebuked his mother just because she had spoken a word of commiseration for Ajeta. The young pioneer was walking alongside the old man, chatting away and making him smile at his witty remarks.

A young woman was walking by the other side of the old man, surely his daughter-in-law, judging by her age and features, but she was dressed all in black and, although she shared the joy of her companions, there was a shadow of sorrow in her eyes. Three young people, a girl and two boys, were coming behind the old man, talking excitedly about the big event of the last night. From time to time they asked the old man questions about the war of 1920 in which he had lost his leg.

The old man was visibly under the effect of deep emotions. He would begin a phrase which he could not finish... At last, he succeeded in saying: «The youth of today is wonderful... Idriz Nelo can die happy now... For me it was sufficient to see the country thus,» he stretched his hand and turned the palm up. «The old construction was rotten, I assure you. Simple repair would not do... It had to be pulled down and you pulled it down... Now you will build a new one, strong and beautiful, but first you must get rid of the rot because it will hinder your work...»

Emira, who at first had felt sympathy for the old man, began to hate him for his last words. What did he mean by «rot»? Certainly the old ruling class, Hajdar Bey and his cronies. But what benefit did that old man expect to gain from their overthrow? «The communist black magic must have turned his head. There can be no other explanation,» she thought.

Tired from the walk and from the words he had spoken, the old man Idriz closed his eyes and drew in a deep breath as if to taste the cool air of the morning. Baxhuli, who had been listening with a sympathetic smile, stepped to the door and opened it wide to invite the old man and the young woman in. But the man stopped him:

«Notify them first, please, then...»

«No need to notify them,» Baxhuli shook his head, laughing. «The comrades of the leadership have given me special instructions to let you in directly.»

Idriz Nelo was radiant. He embraced the Philosopher, nodded his thanks to the young people who had brought him and walked in arm-in-arm with the young woman, holding his head high.

Emira and Eda, frustrated by the respect Baxhuli was showing to the crippled old man, while to them he had not even bothered to give an answer, withdrew several steps aside and stood beside the wall. Baxhuli, while performing his duty, glanced at them from time to time with suspicion.

«He is looking at us as if we have killed his father,» whispered Emira. «They are all of them alike, these...»

Eda nodded, although to her, the partisan Baxhuli had not made such a bad impression.

Many other people entered without being stopped by Baxhuli. Some of them he saluted by standing «at attention», others he received with a smile. Many of them were simple partisans, others had military ranks, which to Emira seemed quite different from the ranks of Zog's officers or these of the Italians and Germans. There were among them civilians, too, but they also carried at least a revolver, bulging under their jackets. Uncle Jazi appeared again among the latter, coming with a broad grin on his face.

«They feel as if they have touched the sky with their hands,» whispered Emira scornfully. «But soon

we shall see what we shall see. He laughs best who laughs last.»

«What do you mean?» asked Eda surprised as if this was the first time she was hearing that kind of music.

Emira had no time to reply. A group of six or seven militarymen were coming down the stairs of the Command building laughing and talking with animation. Among them she saw a civilian wearing an ordinary cap that matched his suit and, remembering what the nurse had said, she thought that this must be the notorious Zef Moisiu. Her heart began to beat quickly and her breath came in short gasps... She mustered all her courage and, as if braving a strong gale, walked towards him. But suddenly she felt a flash blinding her eyes and a veil of mist covered her mind. It was no longer the opinion she had formed about that «unknown» man that terrified her but something entirely different, something much more frightening...

She looked with despair at Eda, as if to ask some help from her, but in vain. Eda was staring stunned at her and at the group of partisans, unable to understand what was going on.

«The social-democrats are on less dangerous,» came above the other voices the voice of the man with the cap. Emira, pale like death, closed her eyes, and her hand went instinctively to her hair.

Eda, who finally saw that her friend was ready to collapse caught her by the arm to support her.

«What happened to you, my dear?» she asked anxiously.

Emira could not answer. She opened slowly her eyes and looked at Eda as in a dream. Her forehead was wet with perspiration.

«Speak, say something. What is the matter with you?» insisted Eda.

«Nothing... nothing. Let's go... Away from here...»

\* \* \*

Zef Moistu saw the guard standing at attention in an attitude he usually reserved for the military men of some distinction and stopped as if he had something special to tell his old comrade, letting the others pass ahead.

«Eh, Baxhuli, what news do we have?» he asked putting his hand on the guard's shoulder. Zef was the only comrade who addressed the guard by his name, and that made Baxhuli extremely happy. The surname «Babush» both pleased and displeased the partizan from Labëria. There were those who spoke it with a friendly tone and he liked it, but others pronounced it in such a way as to mock at him and he regretted it. As far as he knew, the word «babush» could mean either a man of a certain age or a simpleton. Whenever Baxhuli noticed someone calling him «Babush» mockingly he was quick to answer accordingly, for he had a very sharp tongue.

«Everything is just fine, comrade Zef,» he replied loudly, raising his head high. «But people won't leave me in peace coming to me and asking to see you. Not one, or two but more than fifteen persons have asked to see you, by my ideal!»

«Me?» Zef pretended to be surprised.

«You, you! As for the others, it was easy for me... But no, 'We want Zef' they cried, even those who had never seen Zef in their lives... Then there were two girls...»

«I see,» said Zef to stop that torrent of words, but Baxhuli was anxious to keep him as long as possible. He indicated with his eyes the two girls standing on the sidewalk with their faces turned the other way.

«There they are... with their lips pointed red like those bourgeois women... shall I call them?»

«No, no. Don't bother.»



Zef shook hands with the guard and stepped into the street where his comrades were waiting for him surrounded by a crowd of acquaintances, partisans and civilians, commenting with excitement the great event of the previous night.

Among them was Uncle Jazi proud of his «little affair» with the German tank that had pushed through the barricade. He had not noticed Zef, who came from behind and put his hands over the old man's eyes.

Uncle Jazi, touched his arms, his hands, his clothes, mentioned several names, but could not find who was behind him.

«You are getting old, uncle,» Deko teased him.

«Don't you know Zef?» asked another man.

No, I don't know him. How should I? He has become a great man now,» said the old man laughing with his arms round Zef.

Netka, who had been watching the scene with a quiet smile, turned to Deko:

«Who hasn't become great now!» she said. «We are all great.»

«All, comrade Netka, every one of us,» said Zef glad to hear her say those words. «You must say it aloud so that everyone can hear it.»

At that time a group of partisans appeared from the Kusi Street and approached singing the march of the First Division:

*No more with sword and fire  
The enemy shall reign,  
this is the people's hour,  
The dawning day of freedom.*

Zef Moisiu distinguished at the head of the group Ferik Talo holding the Philosopher by the hand and marching with his firm military step and his body upright as if bringing the wonderful news of the magni-

ficent victory. By his side was marching a young man waving his raised fist with the rhythm of the song; his cap was tilted over one eye and his eyes sparkled with joy and excitement.

«This is indeed the dawn of freedom,» murmured Zef when he saw that the young man was Gözim Myzyri, the former company commander of the «Dajti» battalion whom he had not seen for a long time. Involuntarily he began to hum with the others;

*This is the people's hour,  
The dawning day of freedom.*

Others joined gradually in the song, although many of them were hearing it for the first time. The tune rose and spread joyful and powerful.

Emira and Eda had remained where they were with their thoughts in turmoil and their eyes fixed on the crowd that was gathering before the building of the Command.

*This is the people's hour...*

Ferik Talo was raising his voice above the others, as he was marching with his automatic-rifle slung over his shoulder with a hand on his son's partisan cap and the other saluting the crowd.

Emira pressed her temples with both her hands as if to stop a heavy hammer from crushing her head.

A rosy haze was covering the sky. As the song echoed far and wide, thousands of happy faces appeared at the windows and balconies, straining their ears to hear all the words of the song and their eyes to miss nothing of the scene...

The two girls, fused together in a single shadow, stole away engulfed in a cloud of dust blown by the wind of that beautiful November dawn.

---





Lekë. 15.